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Majha Pravas as an alternative source for the history writing of 1857

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Abstract

Majha Pravas is one of the most important vernacular sources on 1857, and it provides a wealth of information on this pivotal event in Indian history. This text becomes more important because of the writer's own circumstances in which he witnessed this whole event and write down on the paper. This text differs significantly from the traditional sources utilized in the revolt's literature. This text provides scholars with a new perspective on the revolt's history. Its language, script, composer, and central character are all completely distinct. This text is a significant component of the vernacular language sources. It's written in Marathi *Modi* script and is a travel account of a poor Brahmin Vishnu Bhatt who travelled from Varsai to Hindustan in 1857, when the revolt was about to erupt. He faced many difficulties and himself encountered various important events of that time. Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi is the central figure in this text. This work is a crucial alternate source for the 1857 revolt.

Keywords: 1857, revolt, alternative source, colonial, British, Mughal, Delhi, history writing

Introduction

The revolt of 1857 was a turning point in the history of India's freedom struggle. A major resistance against the British throughout the main region of Northern and Central India, from the Eastern Punjab to the Narmada region, and from the eastern section of Rajputana to Bihar, was an example in which colonial power was not only challenged, but in certain cases completely toppled. Company rule had never before been challenged by so many diverse parts of society in such a large and systematic way over such a long period of time. Although this effort was eventually unsuccessful, it did generate some circumstances that aided in the development of national consciousness and the advancement of India's freedom war. As a result, this revolt can be considered as a link between the anti-British struggle and the National Movement.

There are still disagreements over the conflict's goals and nature. The investigation of connected primary and secondary sources is still ongoing, and it is taking on new aspects. Despite this, many sources are still underutilized, or there is insufficient information accessible about these sources. Because the majority of the sources for this revolt are government records written in English, biases and preconceptions are unavoidable. There are a few European memoirs that are primarily written in Persian. The poverty of knowledge and the limitations of relying on official reporting as the sole source of information become clear.¹ Alternative sources in vernacular languages, on the other hand, are plentiful, but they have not been widely utilized.

One of these important vernacular sources is *Majha Pravas*. This text differs significantly from the traditional sources utilized in the revolt's literature. This text provides scholars with a new perspective on the revolt's history. Its language, script, composer, and central character are all completely distinct. This text is a significant component of the vernacular language sources. It's written in Marathi *Modi* script and is a travel account of a poor Brahmin Vishnu Bhatt who travelled from Varsai to Hindustan in 1857, when the revolt was about to erupt. He faced many difficulties and himself encountered various important events of that time. Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi is the central figure in this text.

According to Chintaman Rao Vaid, he persuaded Vishnu Bhatt to write this narrative. Vishnu Bhatt writes it down in 1883, about 25 years later. It's important to remember that gap while thinking about how he remembered the revolt's events.

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¹ Tapti Roy, *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 196.

There was already a robust colonial narrative of the revolt at the time he was writing. The amount to which he was impacted or remembered events in a way that was filtered by colonial influence. It's not only an issue of what he remembers and what he doesn't, but these memories are also about what we're supposed to remember. Chintaman Rao Vaid released it after Vishnu Bhatt's death in 1903. This text was utilized as the major source in Brandawan Lal Verma's 1946 novel *Jhansi Ki Rani*. Following that, Amrit Lal Nagar published *Ankhon Dekha Ghadar*, a reprint of this text in Hindi translation. This travelogue, as a significant source, adds to our understanding of the history of this crucial period in Indian history.

Urdu was the most widely spoken language in northern India in the nineteenth century. It was also heavily influenced by Persian, which was the Mughal period's administrative and literary language. As a result, the revolt's primary sources in Persian and Urdu are relatively extensive. A significant number of them have been published. In the early decades of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Bahadur Shah Zafar's reign was regarded as the golden age of Urdu by the Urdu-speaking intellectual class. Details on occurrences in several key regions such as Delhi, Bijnor, Meerut, Badaun, and others are included in the Urdu language content. Letters, personal recollections, and snippets from newspapers from that time are used in biographies of the leaders of this revolt.

S.N. Sen has studied the revenue document written in Shikashtha script of Urdu language. This document has been written by a scribe. This is an important source of information about the revolt. After 50 years of S.N. Sen's studies, William Dalrymple drew his attention to these records. He also tried to translate the shikasta script. The sources written in this script were earlier used less in the history writing. With the help of these sources, Dalrymple gives very strong information about the daily life of Delhi's houses, palaces, and forts in 1857.

In Delhi, Maulvi Muhammad Bakar established the groundwork for Urdu journalism. Baker's newspaper, 'Delhi Urdu Akhbar,' is an excellent source of information about the revolt. In his own research in 1857, Atiq Ahmed Siddiqui compiled copies of all the Urdu newspapers published at Delhi during the revolution, which are now preserved in the National Archives of India. The Persian poem *Siraj-ul-Akbar* was written. Seven of the thirteen volumes of the Delhi Urdu Newspaper were known as *Al-Zafar*, while the remaining six were known as *Sadiq-Al-Akbar*. William Dalrymple chastised the *Delhi Urdu Akhbar*, claiming that Hindus were represented as less devoted than Muslims in some sections of the publication.

The Revolt, according to Ghalib, was more about the rise of the rabble of the lower classes than the fall of the British. The rebel soldiers arrived in Delhi in May 1857 and gained control of Shahjahanabad until the British reclaimed Delhi in September 1857. He spent the majority of his time at the house over these four months, writing about what was going on around him. *Dastanbuy* was published after the revolt in Delhi, based on the Persian notes that had been kept. Ghalib penned a beautiful description of the city's occurrences. The poet expressed his concerns in his diary on how he would survive when his city had been completely devastated.² He

recounts of mass arrests, assassinations, and massacre in his neighborhood.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the content of British writers' published works on the revolt of 1857 was far more explicit than that of Indian writers' published writings. These written materials and publications by British authors established a colonial worldview that dominated for a long period. There was no such substantial work produced until the first decade of the twentieth century, in which the perspective of individuals who participated in the revolution was shown. This, however, is unsurprising. For many decades, it was nearly impossible to dispute the revolt or the colonial perspective because of the British government's savagery in suppressing the revolt and its oppressive policies. In particular, in colonial history writing on revolution, the detailed and one-sided barbarism of rebels, Indian ruling class had been projected. There were gruesome descriptions of violence against women and children in Kanpur, Lucknow, and Delhi.

In such a context, talking or writing about the bravery of the rebels or the barbarism of the English army would be construed as an endorsement of those occurrences that the British saw as barbaric, and this could not be tolerated. At the individual level, rewriting this history was tough. That is why, as the national movement grew in intensity in the first two decades of the twentieth century, favourable conditions allowed for perspectives from the opposing side of the revolt. In his travelogue *Majha Pravas*, Vishnu Bhatt provides a wealth of material, including a depiction of uprising and a central protagonist, *Rani* of Jhansi, who is described in depth for her valour and fortitude, as well as the Palace's day-to-day activities. We also derive a sense of the Marathi people's perspective of northern India as a different geographical identity, *Hindustan*, with a socio-cultural and political understanding of the region that can aid in comprehending the socio-economic status of the Maratha Empire at the time.

Vishnu Bhatt was essentially seeking patronage and financial backing in *Hindustan*. He formed his own perceptions on the activities of the time from his own encounters with rebels, indigenous peoples, and Brahmins from various places. The impact of colonial discourse on people's perceptions of popular uprising, as well as on one's own, must be considered. The rationale for this stems from the nature and purpose of writing itself. Was he under any form of restraint or pressure from the colonial authorities when he wrote?

The Indian government delegated S.N. Sen, who stated in his book *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* that the revolt began as a sepoy mutiny but that as the administration collapsed, the enthusiastic elements became dominant. Sen provides sociological arguments in the first chapter of his book *The Causes*, which have been gaining traction for a long time. According to him, the Vellore mutiny, the Burmese expedition, and several other incidents were responsible for the outbreak of revolt because socio-religious forces were acting as catalysts behind these incidents.³ Social reforms such as Sati abolition and widow remarriage etc.⁴ were considered as an attack on the religion as well as on caste. In this atmosphere, distrust and suspicion had been produced

² William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty*, Delhi, 1857, (Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2006), 416.

³ S.N. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, with a foreword by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, (Delhi: The Publications Division, 1957), 3.

⁴ Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, 17.

by a series of well-intentioned but ill-judged legislative and administrative initiatives that rocked to its very core the sepoy's faith in the bona fide of the *Sarkars*, and successive governor generals contributed unintentionally to the continuous loss of popular confidence in this good faith.⁵

Sen's perspective on the revolt's causes is identical to what Vishnu Bhatt was hearing from two sepoys. He was curious in the causes of the expected revolt when speaking with sepoys from Goa. One of the sepoys claimed that the British were correctly operating the government. Some guns and bullets had been transported from *vilayat* a few days previously. The pistol specifications were well received by all. A sepoy who was a Brahman became aware of the greased cartridges after getting into a fight with someone from the 'low' caste.⁶ It has become a religious matter, and everyone is concerned that the English would ruin our religion by converting us to Christianity. Vishnu Bhatt also emphasises the British administration's incapacity to comprehend the sepoys' sociological causes.⁷

S. N. Sen and Tapti Roy's perspectives on Rani Lakshmi Bai's involvement in rebellion are as follows. Sen claims that the queen recognises the reality that she was forced to join the rebel army due to a threat of violence, and that she was forced to take administrative responsibilities as a result of this fear.⁸ Tapti Roy also emphasizes that the rebels overthrew the British administration of Jhansi, and *Rani* was unwillingly drawn into politics somehow.⁹ This is comparable to Sen's point of view. But, according to Vishnu Bhatt, the soldier approached *Rani* after dismantling the British administration, hailed her, and asked her to become ruler.¹⁰ Though he spent a lot of time in Jhansi's palace under the queen's favour. It's also worth noting that his focus on the revolt's narrative remained consistent across Brahmin and Maratha states. Beyond this realm, he pays little attention.

The way *Rani* became the leader of the rebels in Jhansi shows that leaders or rulers who rebelled were forced more by the immediate situations than by their previous issues with British rule.

Vishnu Bhatt never tires of praising *Rani* for her love of men's sports since she was a child, and for her style, which was comparable to men's. *Rani* observed ancient rituals such as puja, sacrifice, and giving. She was a skilled horsewoman and administrator, as well as chaste, pious, and a Brahmin admirer. All of these factors were crucial in establishing *Rani* as a successful ruler after Gangadhar Rao's death. It is also useful in demonstrating Gangadhar Rao's effeminate identity through theoretical interpretations taken from modern political events and projection of *Rani* as masculine. Despite the fame of the Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and *Rani* Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, who appeared as romantic heroines or masculinized warriors, Indian women did not appear to attract as much unwanted attention in India. We also see that *Rani* keeps herself in the company of women on a regular basis.

On the one side, he glorifies Laxmi Bai with amazing ingenuity, but on the other, he completely ignores Jhalakari

Bai's presence. Jhalakari Bai is depicted as '*amar shaheed*' in many narratives, according to Charu Gupta. Puran Kori, her husband, was a common soldier in Gangadhar Rao's kingdom. Puran Kori was killed in this insurrection while fighting the British. Jhalakari Bai assisted her husband in his traditional cloth weaving profession and accompanied him to the palace on occasion. She was a courageous woman in her own right. She had learned archery, wrestling, horseback riding, and shooting since she was a youngster, and her physical appearance was strikingly similar to Lakshmi Bai's. During the revolt, she assisted *Rani* in escaping the palace and assumed command. She was responsible for the deaths of numerous British soldiers.¹¹

Vishnu Bhatt made no mention of intelligence services, but given the speed with which information spread from one location to the next, it's safe to conclude that the intelligence apparatus was very active at the time. This intelligence technique was beneficial not just to the British but also to the rebels. The role of time in the different events depicted in this literature demonstrates this. The use of hearsay, cheating, and technology played a significant role in this revolution, demonstrating British diplomacy. There is a reference to a British report that Nana Saheb's boat had sunk in the river, and that this news could be heard in all presidencies in a short amount of time. And it was on the basis of this rumor that the British declared their dominance over the region. When British officials summoned Narayan Rao and Madhav Rao, they were caught and arrested empty-handed and without security.

There is a positive reference to British rule. Until the cartridge incident, British rule had been great, and he justifies British rule in many locations. Highways were well-managed by colonial authorities, with frequent checkpoints to ensure that travelers were safe, and British soldiers did not target women or children. As he notes, the British exaggerated the violence to the point where anti-social elements such as thieves, thugs, and other lawbreakers were afraid in Chitrakoot because of the fear of that contingent violence. He seeks to hold the British government accountable for maintaining peace and order in society, but at the expense of many lives. When he argues the British did not harm women, he is attempting to counter rebel atrocities in several areas, particularly Kanpur, where a number of women and children were slaughtered despite Nana Sahab's opposition. However, his reticence on sexual violence, in particular, is a reflection of his problematic mindset. Sexual assaults on Indian women by British soldiers were likewise ignored by the British press. Only a few Britons dared to show tolerance, claiming that Indians, particularly men they knew, could not be as awful as the news and rumors suggested.¹² His portrayal of Peshwa and its aristocracy as the revolt's perpetrators. Is this a genuine assessment or a restriction imposed by hegemonic colonial discourse? These difficulties, on the other hand, reveal his understanding of the colonial rhetoric.

To sum up, this work is a crucial alternate source for the 1857 revolt. Which provides valuable information about the very important event of Indian History. This text becomes

⁵ Sen, Eighteen Fifty-Seven, 39.

⁶ Madhukar Upadhyay, Vishnu Bhatt Ki Aatmkatha, (New Delhi: Vaani Press, 2014), 27.

⁷ Upadhyay, Vishnu Bhatt, 28.

⁸ Sen, Eighteen Fifty-Seven, 278.

⁹ Roy, The Politics of a Popular Uprising, 105.

¹⁰ Upadhyay, Vishnu Bhatt, 68.

¹¹ Charu Gupta, 'Dalit Viranganas' and Reinvention of 1857, 193-212, Essays from Economic & Political Weekly, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2008), 200.

¹² Michael H. Fisher, Multiple meanings of 1857 for Indians in Britain, 81-101, Essays from Economic & Political Weekly, (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2008), 95.

more important because of the writer's own circumstances in which he witnessed this whole event and write down on the paper. There are several restrictions to this material that have previously been discussed in some of the paragraphs. His silence on the lower strata of society, as well as other activities unrelated to Jhansi, is notable. The impact of dominant colonial discourse on the masses, however, cannot be underestimated. *Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal* would also have influenced literary production, which was already influenced by colonial modernity.

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