

Media coverage of 1857

And response of intellectuals of Haryana

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In this august gathering of learned people comprising historians, scholars of different shades and representatives of the media I am feeling delighted to present a few thoughts on the '**Media Coverage and Response of the Intellectuals of Haryana**' on the events of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. It was called First War of Independence by Vir Sarvarkar about whose personality and sacrifices many in this gathering are aware of.

Every one of you present here knows fairly well that how far and to which extent the attention of the media, in print, film as well as electronic was drawn to the historic event of 1857 in Indian history when its 150th anniversary came to be celebrated this year. As everybody is aware it was mainly a State sponsored activity in which large amount of funds were made available by the Govt. of India as well as contributions from the respective States of the Union of India. By print media, I mean the news magazines and the news papers whereas the electronic media refers mainly to the television channels and the film refers to the documentary as well as feature segments. I do not wish to comment on the nature and the quality of State sponsored celebrations that were held throughout India but specifically wish to point out the quantitative coverage of news, views and opinions that appeared in recent months in the Indian mass media with regard to events that happened in Haryana covering the period of '**Mutiny**' in the year 1857.

I may wish to inform that most of the news items and feature articles that appeared in the most circulated dailies and periodicals of India during recent months were not only collected but carefully analysed by me. I used to scan these items appearing in both the regional as well as national level mass media in print. I also watched the movie, particularly The Rising, which was produced by Amir Khan. I have yet to make it for the documentaries relating to the '*Swatantarta Filmotsava*' that are slated to be screened at the Siri Fort Auditorium, New Delhi from August 11 to 14. I know little about the content and quality of the documentaries selected by the Films Division of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India but any one of you that wishes to go there and watch must book in advance. The entry is free of cost and on first come first served basis.

Anyhow, let me return to the topic for making relevant comments. In the first instance, I beg your pardon to often use the idiom '**Sepoy Mutiny**' as I have already made it clear that it has now been accepted as First War of Indian Independence, though much out of patriotism rather than from an independent and impartial view. In holding this view, that is entirely my personal, I would like to say that writing of History about such a major event as the rising of 1857 which proved a turning point for both the British as well as Indians need unbiased recording, interpretation and analysis by a single author or multiple authors having full intellectual independence. If an author gets emotional, becomes selective rather than objective in interpretation of facts and have not made field visits to exact locations of vast number of theatres of the Mutiny, I fear that many finer elements of historiography are bound to get sacrificed. Then, there is question as to who is the author. Is he a serious scholar in the main stream of history or a renowned and a mature journalist? Then, there are more questions pertaining to the nationality of authors and reviewers who had quite diverse opinions on the major historical event of 1857 occurring in a country like India that had great impact on the masses of India as well as the British Empire. This event cast its influence in the neighbouring countries and the society at large that shaped the future destiny of various people here and abroad. None of us including the modern writers, journalists or the persons that authored documents were born when the 1857 occurred in India. What do we have as resource or reference material of history on this specific

event called the 'Sepoy Mutiny'? How can we authenticate the facts now when most of the insignificant looking vestiges of the First War of Independence have vanished? In the early phases of writing the history of the Mutiny the authors relied mostly on the official papers, documents and the Books authored by British scholar officers who were an eyewitness to the horrific events relating to 1857 or witnessed the events as passive observers or had actively partaken in the suppression of the Mutiny or were part of the administrative machinery of the day for pronouncing adverse verdicts or had become instruments of the State for inflicting smaller or greater degree of penalties on the Mutineers including the innocent and patriotic people who espoused the cause. There is a great volume of information about general and academic history of the events in 1857 but, of late, scholars with an 'Indian' mind attempted writing the subaltern history of the events of 1857 and came out with eye opening versions and mind stirring interpretations. This new genre of historians dug the facts from the people's records and personal documents. However, it is another matter how we evaluate a galore of these documents and monographs that were produced before 2007 and how we assess the recently circulated versions of opinions and view points that have been discussed at great length in the mass media. Have we, in a way, really entered into an exercise of re-evaluating the history or historical significance of 1857 as it occurred and documented previously or as it occurred and could be viewed now in the light of the arousal of new sensitivities about the issues that involve all of us now? It is in this light that my attention was drawn to the lack of recent reportage in mass media about the activities of 'rebels', 'Sepoys' or hordes of belligerent people that rose to the occasion and fought against the British subjugation in Haryana. For clarity of point, it has become pertinent to point out that the mass circulated news magazines such as the '**Outlook**' and the '**Frontline**' published long feature articles in July 2006 and June 2007, respectively about the Mutiny. The former of the two publications presented a long review and commentary on the William Dalrymple's Book --**The Last Moghul**, whereas the latter delved chiefly on the uprising of the people against the British in the South. In addition, other periodicals of English language traversed the similar path and published their own account of the conduct of the British and its impact of the masses through journalistic reviews. **Economic and Political Weekly**, a reputed magazine of scholarly communication, particularly brought out a special issue on the Mutiny of 1857 and candidly reviewed whatever happened during those months. The EPW tried to honestly present scholarly reviews covering major aspects of the event and was successful in doing so to great extent. The newspapers were not too far behind in publishing feature articles and reviews providing several new insights into the events of 1857. Regrettably much of this material remained confined to covering the theatres of the skirmishes in United Provinces, Bundelkhand, Avadh, Bengal and the Doab. The Hindustan, a publication of the H.T. Media house, is continuing publishing full page coverage on the events of the 1857 uprising. To the best of my knowledge, this is the only news paper that has serialized for so many months publication of material on 1857. Advancements in printing technology obviously made the mark in excellent presentation of the material. I have preserved some of the pages from this series. The Pioneer, The Hindu, The Tribune, The Times of India, The Hindustan Times, The Statesman, The Telegraph, The Indian Express from the English language side and Jansatta, The Hindustan, Dainik Bhaskar, Dainik Jagran, Amar Ujala, Aaj, Nai Duniya and Swatantra Bharat from the Hindi side did their duty well. But what bothered me most was the negligible or little coverage of Haryana in any feature article or review that appeared week after week in this reputed publications. Was there a bias or lack of information or lack of proper research due to which Haryana did not figure in the recent coverage of 1857? Here, I do not wish to count the reportage about the State sponsored celebrations that were required to be observed in a mandatory fashion by the administrative machinery but reportage of certain announcements and events that were of another kind and beyond the main governmental domain attracted attention. These news items published on different dates and six months apart --one in January and the other in June 07, informed us about the collection of additional material on 1857 from Haryana for the '**Dharohar**' museum recently set up at Kurukshetra University apart from acquisition of assorted material by the Department of Archives, Govt. of Haryana. The announcement from the Kurukshetra University Department of History was with regard to 'exhibition-cum-research centre based exclusively on the significant historical event of the Indian history i.e.

1857, whereas the other about imposing a ban on the further circulation of the book on the 1857 Freedom Struggle with focus on Haryana in addition to acquisition of copies of microfilms of The Tribune newspaper published prior to 1947 and banning of a book by Late Ram Singh Jakhar besides indication of publishing a new book on this major event. It may be relevant to point out that the banned book compiled and authored by Late Ram Singh Jakhar was published by State funding.

Besides keeping a sharp eye on whatever appeared in the media with regard to Haryana, I also did surfing on the World Wide Web for locating news items, feature articles, scholarly reviews and other information that may have indicated about the participation of the people of Haryana in the uprising of 1857 but could not find even a passing reference in whatever way I searched the Web. The results were not only disappointing but also bothersome that perturbed me a lot. It prompted me to point out the failure of the media persons and scholars in mentioning about the people of Haryana that their participation was in no way less significant. I sent a letter to Mr. Vinod Mehta, Editor of the **Outlook** magazine that got published in an edited form in its issue dated 24th August 2006. However, the letter is recaptured in full text here:

‘This refers to the article ‘Mutineer’s Aboard’ by Anuradha. I also read to the previous article appeared in an earlier issue of the Outlook magazine. While I liked the writings I have to say a few things as below:

1. Why there is no mention of the contributions of the people of Haryana during the uprising of 1857? Was the uprising confined only to Avadh, Merrut and Delhi?
2. Were no historians worth the name in Haryana could be found who could have said something on the events (those happened in Haryana as well in other parts of the country) during the uprising of 1857?
3. Why are Pakistan and Bangladesh being roped in the celebrations of the 150th Anniversary of the 1857 Uprising?
4. What can be the reaction of the British and the British Govt. towards the celebrations, especially when the Indian Govt. itself is not clear about the motives and procedures of the celebrations?

Firstly, Anuradha did not do good research work to list contributions of the people from each State of the Union of India who participated in the uprising of 1857. Secondly, there are good historians in Haryana, both in the academic fields and self-styled, who could have been approached to list their opinions. They could have been found with a little effort had Anuradha contacted the Vice-Chancellors of the Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak and Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra. As far I am aware the people of Hansi, Rohtak, Sirsa, Dadri, Ambala, Karnal and Kaithal rose to the challenge of the times. The role of the village communities in Haryana to rise against the British was significant. No less important was their role in protecting the lives of the innocent men, women and children who turned fugitives as the rebels charged the seats of administration and occupied places. The events were duly recorded in the 1883 and 1910 District Gazetteers of Rohtak and Hisar (though from British point of view). The Administrative reports of the Punjab Government of the day contain detailed description of the events in an official style. Albeit, some grains of truth are hidden therein. They surely tell a tale of persecution and brutality by both the natives as well as the officials and the disciplined soldiers of the British Indian Govt. Recently, Prof. Madan Mohan Juneja, a former historian at the Jat College, Hisar brought out a book –**People and Personalities of Hisar** that clearly enlists the contributions of certain people who actively participated in the uprising of 1857. At present he is the best person (as a researcher) to comment upon the uprising and people’s participation in Hisar district during the 1857. I have seen that almost all national publications have a tendency to neglect Haryana while they carry on the daily routine of reporting about national or regional events. You as Vinod Mehta, a senior and impartial editor of repute should not allow happening this to the **Outlook** magazine. Mr. Mahender Singh Nagal, Deputy Commissioner of Panipat, recently told me that a huge roller stone with which the British crushed to death dozens of mutineers on the G.T Road near Samalkha has been identified and preserved by the people of Khewda (a village on the banks of the Jamuna) and installed as a memorial. There is a Khooni Sarak (the bloody road known as Lal Sarak) in Hansi too. At Meham, 105 kms from Delhi on NH-10,

there is a pond called Murund on the banks of which hundreds of mutineers were cremated by locals after they received dead bodies of the mutineers when they were put to gallows by the British. A village named Rohnat, near Hansi, was auctioned by the British and its residents made paupers by them because they partook in the mutiny. Villages such as Jamalpur and Hazimpur were burnt to the last straw as punishment for partaking in the general anarchy let loose by the First War of Independence. Many more people have remained unlisted because nobody bothered to write the local history or the history of the villages of the State of Haryana. As I was able to record the history of about 500 villages of Haryana, it was possible to record the vestiges of the punishment inflicted on the people of Haryana as an aftermath of 1857.'

It should perturb all of us as to why there was and still is little coverage in the media about the contributions of the people of Haryana in the rebellion of 1857 in spite of the fact that it was duly recorded in the all official publications of that time. Why we are so indifferent in pointing out the lacunae and sit idly, wait for a long time and watch impatiently so that others come forward with their native versions without mentioning Haryana? All the major dailies including the reputed news magazines that circulate significant number of copies in Haryana ignored this important aspect in their regular or particular coverage. On the other hand, they continue to earn huge revenue on account of advertisements that are published by the people of Haryana including the Govt. of Haryana. In view of this they have some obligations that they ignore to fulfil. I have a feeling that our intellectuals are either slow in registering response or do not rise to the occasion at all fearing reprisals or receiving penalties from their employers and thus wish to keep at a safe distance from events and incidents that may have controversial or sensitive attachment. I may inform you that the Conduct Rules of the Govt. clearly specify that contributions of purely academic, literary or scientific nature do not come under the purview and scrutiny for obtaining prior permission of the employer and do not invite any sort of punishment or imposing of penalties under the said rules. In spite of this freedom of expression, ensured also by the Fundamental Rights as enumerated in the Constitution of India, our intelligentsia have allowed others to play on the turf. This is why the national level media houses have seldom caught and covered spontaneous but significant events relating to Haryana. They publish whatever comes the way or is politically correct or multiplies revenue from advertising. Let me mention that Prof. Daulat Ram Chaudhary has several times pointed this out in the regional media but in vain. It is also regrettable that in spite of industrial magnates we still do not have a newspaper of good standing. Should we not rise to the occasion and assert our role to not only express our annoyance for this neglect but also contribute on major events such as 1857 that had a great impact on the destiny of the people of Haryana? A few years ago the Journal of Haryana Studies, published from the Kurukshetra University, used to take research articles and short communications from scholars from other centres of learning, particularly Haryana. I have not seen it for quite some time. There was also great lack of research papers on 1857 relating to Haryana in the Indian History Congress convention held annually. Can a well informed person from the audience name a few reputed publications and throw light on the number of research papers that were published by our own historians, social scientists or economists on the uprising of 1857 with particular focus on Haryana? I say this because the Western world got particularly interested in funding research studies and publishing material on art, subaltern history and culture of South Asian countries, particularly India. But here also Haryana got neglected. It even did not get a back bench. Are we somewhere not responsible for this awesome situation and make efforts to salvage us from the apathetic situation? Besides other things it is the peer reviewed research studies that attract attention of the media persons. Celebrations only leave a passing impact of the minds of the people whereas the research studies hold permanent niches in the lasting value documentation. Although studies might have been done on certain aspects of the uprising of 1857 to determine the role of Haryanvi people but that has not come to the light through the mass media. I leave it to historians to do their share of work for the media now to enlist the contributions of Haryana during the uprising of 1857 lest the posterity does not accuse us of another kind of neglect? An editorial entitled '**Who writes our story?**' published in the 30th April 2007 issue of the Indian Express is highly relevant to throw some light on the issue as to why the reportage was important for 1857 and how it was being covered in the media. To quote some portion from it would not be out of place.

'Without a doubt, 1857 is an important mile stone in the evolution of modern India. But the lacklustre character of the celebrations surrounding the one hundred and fiftieth year of India's First War of Independence raises some profound questions about the relationship between the nation and the important events that made it. The first is the striking contrast we

still see between India's religious celebrations and its civic ones. The former are colourful, spontaneous, diversely imagined and organised by the people. The latter remain for the most part dull, solemn, doled out in standardised formats and manufactured by state.

The question is: why aren't citizens taking charge of their own history, commemorating them in their own way? The reasons are complex. Part of it has to do with the state constructing 1857 as an icon, rather than lively history. 1857 is also a touchy subject, **because there are many competing narratives about these events.** And for all our talk about unity in diversity, these competing narratives can expose our fault lines. There is also something to the claim that the character of our patriotism may be changing: rousing narratives of sacrifice do not move us in the same way they used. But an important part of the answer is that Indians still have not taken charge of writing their own history. While Indian historiography is theoretically sophisticated in many ways, the art of great narrative historiography written by Indians is all but dead.....'

I am leaving the rest of the editorial here and conclude my address as the points I wanted to raise have been amply emphasized.
