



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## **Religion and retribution in the Indian rebellion of 1857\***

Carter, Marina; Bates, Crispin

### **Citation**

Carter, M., & Bates, C. (2009). Religion and retribution in the Indian rebellion of 1857\*. *Leidschrift|Empire & Resistance. Religious Beliefs Versus The Ruling Power*, 24(April), 51-68. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72756>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72756>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# Religion and retribution in the Indian rebellion of 1857\*

*Marina Carter and Crispin Bates*



*Fig. 1: 6<sup>th</sup> May 1858 'Conflict with the Ghazees before Bareilly': 'Some of the Ghazees came on bravely; and with a determination worthy of a better cause used their kookrees even when upon the bayonets of the Highlanders'.<sup>1</sup>*

In this paper we assess the religious motivations of Muslim rebels in the Indian uprising of 1857, taking into account the subject position of the various actors and the time frame within which both motivations and responses are imagined. What might seem to be a powerful causative reason

---

\* Research for this article was conducted with the aid of a grant from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for a project entitled 'Mutiny at the Margins: the Indian Uprising of 1857'. The project was conducted in the School of History, Classics and Archaeology, University of Edinburgh, between September 2006 and August 2008, to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the uprising. For further details see [www.casas.ed.ac.uk/mutiny](http://www.casas.ed.ac.uk/mutiny)

<sup>1</sup> Charles Ball, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, 2 vols. (London, 1858-1859).

in the minds of elite groups engaged in attempting to restore control may in fact be a mixture of factors amongst the subaltern elements involved in any insurgency. Religious motivation also functioned as a powerful rationale for arbitrary and violent methods of suppression, just as well as it could serve as a rallying cry for insurrectionists. Both sides used religion as a legitimisation for their activities, when their motives and objectives may be said to have lain entirely elsewhere. Religion may also be invoked as a legitimisation retrospectively and long after the events themselves. A further difficulty lies in the historical period considered, since the rhetoric of religion was commonly the form in which otherwise mundane and secular issues would be discussed. For both sides even if religion was not a prime motivation it could simply be the language in which resistance was discussed.

### Labelling the ‘rebels with an islamic cause’

Muslim rebels with a purported or avowed religious agenda were commonly termed *ghazis* or *jhadis* and *mujahidin* in British sources. This terminology implied that they were holy warriors, fighting for Islam. However, contemporaries and historians have contested the meaning and significance of these terms, while the identities of those who fought under these labels, or were ascribed them, remain largely unknown and unexplored; indeed the motivations of those individuals and groups who have been studied are hotly contested.

A recent study of the concept of jihad in South Asia, by Ayesha Jalal, describes the many conflicting views of Muslim clerics or *imams*, following the outbreak of the Indian Uprising. Interpreting their actions, many moderate Muslims in the nineteenth century insisted that a fatwa describing India as *Dar-ul-Harb* (abode of war) did not amount to a call for jihad, and that a jihad itself need not necessarily involve armed struggle.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, there was profound disagreement amongst Muslim clerics as to whether 1857 indeed offered the circumstances of a just and winnable war against unjust, corrupt, and oppressive rule, which were the necessary prerequisites for jihad. There was little doubting the position of some, such as Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who was Peshwa Nana Sahib’s representative in London, and who was radicalised by the preaching of Sayyid Ahmad Shaheed of Rae

---

<sup>2</sup> Ayesha Jalal, *Partisans of Allah: Jihad in colonial India* (Cambridge, Massachusetts 2008) 116.

Bareilly whilst performing the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) on his way back to India. Ahmadullah Shah's ideas for a jihad against the British were ridiculed by the *ulema* in Delhi, and he was soon after captured and imprisoned by the British. However, when the Meerut mutineers released him from jail in Faizabad, he immediately cleaved to the side of the rebels in Lucknow and became an influential adviser to the Begum Hazrat Mahal.

Fazl-i-Haq, by contrast although subsequently transported to the Andamans, was probably at best an unwilling accomplice to the rebels in Lucknow, where formerly he had been chief judge. Although accused of supporting a jihad against the British, there was no documentary evidence of this, and his correspondence reveals instead detailed theological and practical criticisms of Hazrat Mahal and other leaders of the revolt. Others, such as Maulana Muhammad Qsim Nanautawi, the famous scholar of the Deoband Islamic seminary, and Maulana Rashid Ahmad, were initially hostile to the revolt, and only took up the rebel's cause after being persuaded of the injustice of the English in their campaign of repression.<sup>3</sup>

A political statement by Mirza Firoz Shah, the Mughal Emperor's grandson, who for some time commanded the rebel forces in Delhi, invoked the concept of jihad in order to curb and quell the excesses of rebel troops, who had indulged in plundering and looting and had failed to protect women, children, and the innocent. Meanwhile, intellectuals such as the poet Ghalib and the historian Maulvi Zakaullah, who resided in Delhi throughout the insurrection, were horrified by the violence and firmly articulated the need for reconciliation with the British, as did the famous leader of Islamic modernisation in India, Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Sayyid Ahmad Khan publicly denounced calls for a jihad against the British in Bijon in 1857: behaviour which he carefully justified in an account of the causes of the revolt which he published in 1859. The emperor himself was considered to be a heretic by many *ulema* in Delhi, who denounced him in a fatwa issued before the revolt commenced, which urged Muslims in the city not to visit any place where the Emperor worshipped. Once the revolt had begun, a fatwa was issued by fifty-three *ulema* from the Deoband seminary and elsewhere declaring British rule to be preferable to Russian, since under British rule Indian Muslims were permitted to practice their religion. Many Shia refused to join rebel bands for the lack of an imam at their head.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Jalal, *Partisans of Allah*, 117-128.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, 129-131.

Altogether the picture presented by Jalal is one of considerable doubt and uncertainty amongst ulema concerning the legitimacy of the rebel cause, and the conviction of many that such a battle could not be fought in the name of religion. However, for the British in India in 1857 there were few such scruples - the ghazis were 'a race of devils and fanatics' whom it was their Christian duty to suppress.<sup>5</sup> The events of the mutiny revealed to British eyes the apparently effective tactics of Wahabis<sup>6</sup> like Inayat Ali who had allegedly infiltrated the sepoy army, imbuing the Muslim soldiers

with a hatred of *English Kafirs*. The crescentaders were supposedly drilled daily, sometimes twice a day and, on parade, were taught to recite songs extolling the glories of *Jihad*.<sup>7</sup>

Some Muslim scholars agree that the preaching of such maulvis (a title given to religious scholars or *ulema*) did indeed have an effect on those soldiers 'who later joined the Mujahidin at the outbreak of the war in May 1857'.<sup>8</sup> Another strand of historiography argues that the mujahidin who took part in what they conceived as a jihad, did so in the belief that the Uprising was an extension of the egalitarian and reformist Shah Waliullahi movement.<sup>9</sup> Others again may have been influenced to join the ghazis, not by any fatwa, but by the prophecies and rumours that circulated. An example is that of Neamatullah Shah, which was printed as a supplement to vernacular newspapers published in Delhi well before 1857, and which

---

<sup>5</sup> NAM 6609-139, Papers and letters of Lt Kendal Coghill, letter from Delhi of 22 Sept 1857. The same men described as mujahidin by the Indians, were denounced as 'Wahabis' by the British, according to Altaf Qadir and Sabeeha Atlas, 'The War of Independence 1857 and the North West Frontier: The struggle of the Mujahidin against the English' in: C. Bates ed. *New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857* (New Delhi 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Wahhabism is a conservative reform movement within Sunni Islam (demonised by colonial authors) which is attributed to Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, an eighteenth century scholar from Saudi Arabia, who advocated a return to the practices of the forefathers of Islam.

<sup>7</sup> Citation in A.H. Dani, *Peshawar: Historic city of the frontier* (1969) 183.

<sup>8</sup> Qadir and Atlas, 'The War of Independence 1857'.

<sup>9</sup> This view is articulated in M.A. Qadiri, '1857 aur Ham' in: S. Barelwi, *Jang-i azadi ka mujahid* (Karachi 1966). For more information on the Waliullahi, see M. A. Ghazi *Islamic Renaissance in South Asia (1707-1867): The role of Shah Waliullah and his successors*. (New Delhi 2004).

described the hundred year rule of the 'Nazarene'.<sup>10</sup> Such predictions gained further currency in 1857, but many more must have been inspired by the so-called 'fatwa of jihad' which is said to have been 'choreographed by Bakht Khan to capture religious passions and step up recruitment'. Published on 26 July 1857 in Delhi, it appeared with the signatures or seals of 35 prominent ulema. The fact that many (including the influential Maulana Sayyid Nazir Husain, who was exonerated by a British court) claimed to have signed only under duress, still leaves open the possibility that many rebels in Delhi may have been inspired to believe they were fighting in a just and religious cause.<sup>11</sup>

The voluminous collection of mutiny papers concerning Delhi that have survived and which offer both British and Indian perspectives on the events of those momentous months of 1857, are a good place to begin the search for descriptions of the ghazi or 'religious' rebels and to enquire into the rationale that lay behind their actions.

### **Encounters with ghazis, 1857-1858**

A number of sources attest to the fact that alongside the 'poorbeas' or rebel Hindu sepoys who entered Delhi after fleeing their cantonments, were large numbers of 'freelance' and 'untrained' Muslims, who are referred to as mujahidin. This group are said to have caused problems for the forces representing law and order during this turbulent time. Bahadur Zafar Shah had to juggle the often conflicting opinions and wishes of the long term residents, and the newly arrived sepoys, while, in between were 'the volunteers, the mujahids, mostly Muslim [translated invariably as 'fanatics' by the colonials] whose antagonism towards the city's Hindu subjects and the constant zeal to declare Jihad was a source of irritation for him'.<sup>12</sup> These ghazis were evidently a visible and self-identifying community – Sa'id

---

<sup>10</sup> Council of India Minutes and Memoranda 1858-1947: C/137/ ff. 20-79. India Office, 30 April 1874. Cited in Lahiri, 'The Telegraph and Canning' in: M. Carter and C. Bates ed., *1857: Global Perspectives* (New Delhi 2009).

<sup>11</sup> The fatwa is described in detail by M.A. Qadiri, *Jang-i Azadi 1857* (Karachi 1976) 402-416.

<sup>12</sup> M. Farooqui, 'A million mutinies: the Ghadar in Delhi, gleaned from the Mutiny Papers', *Biblio*, March-April 2007.

Mubarak Shah described them as armed with axes and wearing blue tunics and green turbans.<sup>13</sup>

The memoirs of Moinil Haq, who was residing in Delhi during 1857, offers some interesting insights into the divided attitudes of the Muslim residents towards both the British and the rebel forces. He notes that some of the Muslims, along with the money changers and other wealthy Hindus remained loyal to the British, and therefore took steps to 'make ineffective the power of the Mujahidin and uproot them, and then scatter and disrupt them.'<sup>14</sup> It seems they had good reason to fear the influence of the ghazis, who, from the rebels' own accounts, were actively planning acts that were calculated to inflame tensions with Hindu residents. Thus, on 30<sup>th</sup> July 1857, it is recorded that the police were asked to intervene to prevent any acts of cow slaughter, having learnt that the mujahidin were planning to engage in ritual cow killings, which, it was feared, would lead to riots, and thereby play into British hands.<sup>15</sup> The reason for the propertied Muslims' animadversion to the ghazis is revealed in the account of Sa'id Mubarak Shah, who wrote that their principal motivation for coming to Delhi was to 'plunder'.<sup>16</sup>

The allies of the British in the city, who Moinil Haq explicitly styles as 'enemies of the fighters [mujahidin]', devised a scheme to severely restrict their food supplies, and consequently to destroy their power. He reports:

They concealed all the grain and cereals which were available in the city and stopped all supplies which used to come from the towns and villages until they were forced to pass their days and nights in hunger, thirst, excessive heat and anxiety.<sup>17</sup>

These tactics were beginning to take effect. From mid August, it was estimated that the numbers of rebels in Delhi had fallen significantly as a result of desertion. The British political officer serving with the Delhi Field Force, estimated the 'fanatics' [i.e. ghazis], to have numbered some 25,000 in Delhi, and asserted on 19th August, that they had all 'vanished as they

---

<sup>13</sup> IOR [India Office Records] Eur Mss B 138 Said Mobarak Shah, 'The City of Delhi during 1857'.

<sup>14</sup> M. Haq, 'The Story of the War of Independence', *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 5:1 (1957) 33.

<sup>15</sup> M. Farooqui, 'The Police in Delhi in 1857', in: Bates, *New Perspectives*.

<sup>16</sup> IOR Eur Mss B 138 'The City of Delhi during 1857'.

<sup>17</sup> Haq, 'The Story of the War of Independence', 36.



could get no food'.<sup>18</sup> These numbers were also mentioned by Lieutenant Kendal Coghill whose letters, nevertheless, seem to suggest that this ghazi force was still present when the British took Delhi in September. Similarly, other accounts suggest that the British forces were assaulted outside Delhi by 'a mass of ghazis from the Bareilly and Nimach camps [who] hastened to *talimars* [swords] and hurled themselves upon the British'.<sup>19</sup> Within the city walls, also, the conquering British force came upon the bodies of slain ghazis, who had been defending the palace. Charles Griffiths provided this account of the scene, on the afternoon of 20<sup>th</sup> September 1857:

I started in the afternoon with two of our officers to view a portion of the city. We made our way first in the direction of the Palace, passing down the Chandni Chauk (Silver Street) and entering the Great Gate of the former imperial residence of the Mogul Emperors. Here a guard of the 60th Rifles kept watch and [we] were shown the bodies of the fanatics who had disputed the entrance and had been killed in the enclosure. None of them were sepoys, but belonged to that class of men called 'ghazi,' or champions of the faith, men generally intoxicated with bhang, who are to be found in every Mohammedan army – fierce madmen, devotees to death in the cause of religion.<sup>20</sup>

Outside Delhi, British forces were also reporting encounters with ghazis. In the middle of June, a force headed by General Macpherson was confronted en route to Agra at a village located near the River Chumbul with 200 ghazis commanded by a Muslim who had been a native officer in the Gwalior contingent. He came to parley with them, 'arrayed in green, fingering his beads unceaseless'. Another rebel force, apparently heading for Agra from Mhow and Indore, was said to be composed of rebel sepoys from those stations, alongside '600 men of Holkar's army with seven guns and 1,000 ghazees'.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> E. Stokes, *The peasant armed. The Indian Revolt of 1857* (Oxford 1986) 93.

<sup>19</sup> NAM 6609-139 Letters of Lieutenant Kendal Coghill; the quote is from Edwardes, *Red Year*, 230, cited in Stokes, *The peasant armed*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> C.J. Griffiths, *A narrative of the siege of Delhi with an account of the mutiny at Ferozepore in 1857* (London 1910).

<sup>21</sup> G.W. Forrest, *The Indian Mutiny 1857-8 Selections from the Letters Despatches and other State Papers preserved in the Military Department, of the Government of India* vol. 4 (Edinburgh 1904-1912).



British descriptions of military encounters with ghazis generally portray these Muslim rebel fighters as displaying unusual daring and bravado. The regimental history of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the Royal Sussex Regiment gives an account of ‘uncommon valour’ displayed by ‘a band of fanatic ghazees’ at the battle of Allygurh, on 24 August 1857:

Dressed in garments white as the driven snow, they emerged from their ambuscade in a garden, snapped their scabbards into two, flung the pieces from them, flourished their flashing scimitars aloft, shouted ‘Victory!’ ‘Religion!’ and attacked the advance of skirmishers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Europeans with such frantic fury and desperation that it went hard with our men till the guns were brought to bear.<sup>22</sup>

In October 1857, a British force under Colonel Greathed, securely encamped in cantonments at Agra was surprised by a ‘daring advance guard’ of five ghazis who actually entered the British camp ‘playing tom-toms’ and stormed a tent, killing two men of the 9<sup>th</sup> Lancers outright, and severely wounding a third. No mention is made of the fate of the ghazis, but there seems little doubt that this was a ‘suicide mission’.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the best known description of a ghazi force during the uprising, is that made by participants and eye witnesses at the Battle of Bareilly on 5th May 1858. On that day, advancing British forces spotted the rebels ahead, about 5 miles from Bareilly itself, and a party of Sikhs and a light company advanced ‘in skirmishing order’.

all at once a most furious charge was made by a body of about 360 Rohilla Ghazis, who rushed out, shouting ‘Bismillah! Allah! Allah! Deen! Deen!’. Sir Colin [Campbell] was close by, and called out ‘Ghazis, Ghazis! Close up the ranks! Bayonet them as they come on’ (...) But that was not so easily done; the Ghazis charged in blind fury, with their round shields on their left arms, their bodies bent low, waving their tulwards over their heads, throwing themselves under the bayonets, and cutting at the men’s legs. The struggle was short, but every one of the Ghazis was killed. None attempted to escape; they had evidently come on to kill or be killed, and a hundred

---

<sup>22</sup> Sussex Record Office [SRO] Royal Sussex Regiment [RSR] records, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion History, 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, 16-17.

and thirty three lay in one circle right in front of the colours of the Forty-Second.<sup>24</sup>

One of the ghazis is described as 'enveloped in a thick quilted tunic of green silk, through which the blunt Enfield bayonet would not pass'. He looked to be getting the better of the Highlander's bayonet until a Sikh officer of the Fourth Punjabis 'took the Ghazi's head clean off with one sweep of his keen tulwar'.<sup>25</sup>

The next day, as troops advanced on the city of Bareilly, more ghazis had to be dealt with. In one large house on the outskirts of the town, some fifty Rohilla ghazis had barricaded themselves in, and a company was sent to storm the house, after several shells had been pitched into it. One man was cut into sixteen pieces by the ghazis. In another instance, to demonstrate the sharpness of the swords wielded by them, the injuries suffered by a young officer of the Seventh Hussars as he charged through 'a band of ghazis' were described: 'One leg was clean lopped off above the knee, the right arm cut off, the left thigh and left arm both cut through the bone, each wound produced by a single cut from a sharp, curved tulwar'.<sup>26</sup>

In another characteristic description of the 'resolute' ghazis 'bent on death', Major S. C. Macpherson described an encounter with thirteen ghazis who had decided to return to the Fort of Gwalior and to hold out there until death. As Lieutenant Rose of the 25<sup>th</sup> Bombay Native Infantry advanced with a force to take the stronghold,

The Ghazees, having taken post on a bastion flung over the walls all their gold and silver coin, slew their women and children and swore to die (...) On the bastion the fanatics withstood them steadfastly and slaying, were slain. Rose, who was swift to do battle among the foremost, fell mortally wounded.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> This battle is discussed in A. Taylor, *A companion to the Indian Mutiny* 138, Forrest, *The Indian Mutiny* vol 3, and W H Russell, *My diary in India, in the year 1858-59* vol. II (London 1860) 14. The account given here is from Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny, 1857-59* (London 1894), Chapter XV.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> M. Edwards ed., *The relief of Lucknow* (London 1962) 149-150.

<sup>27</sup> Report on Gwalior, 20 June 1858 by Major S. C. Macpherson, cited in Forrest, *The Indian Mutiny*, Volume 4.

The hyperbole of these descriptions of religious fervour displayed by ghazis and expressed both by British accounts and by the memoirs of Indian observers like Moinul Haq share the flaw, however, of offering only a collective overview, from a critical perspective, of a large group of individuals. Such partisan and partial accounts of the Muslim warriors said to have participated in the uprising for religious reasons, necessitate a closer examination of the background, composition and structure of these groups.

### Who were the ghazis?

Scholars are generally in agreement that those who rose to calls for a jihad against the English or *Angrez* - the ghazis or mujahidin - were essentially a 'volunteer' force.<sup>28</sup> Dalrymple calls them 'freelance' and 'untrained' and suggests similarities between the 'peasant army' that Hindu rulers could mobilize, and the ghazis that 'Muslim rulers could call upon'.<sup>29</sup> Irfan Habib has defined the 'ghazis' as being a mixed bag of Wahabi clerics, Naqshbandis, but as mostly composed of the skilled wage earning classes.<sup>30</sup> The force encountered at Bareilly was described as being with few exceptions 'gray-bearded men of the Rohilla race, clad in green, with green turbans and kummerbunds, round shields on the left arm, and curved talwars'<sup>31</sup> The British tended to assume that the ghazis dressed for martyrdom: in a battle at Sittana in May 1858, the Muslim warriors are described as 'dressed in their best for the occasion, mostly in white but some of the leaders wore velvet cloaks'.<sup>32</sup>

The regional origins of the Delhi contingent of ghazis are said to have included several hundred from Gurgaon, Hansi and Hissar, and a much larger number - some 4,000 - from the small principality of Tonk in Rajasthan.<sup>33</sup> More generally, Clare Anderson stresses the mixed

---

<sup>28</sup> See for example Farooqui, 'A million mutinies', 15 where he equates mujahidin with volunteer.

<sup>29</sup> W. Dalrymple, in: G. Rand and Bates ed., *New Military Perspectives on 1857* (New Delhi, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> I. Habib, 'The coming of 1857', *Social Scientist* 26 (Jan-Apr 1998) 12.

<sup>31</sup> Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny* Chapter XV.

<sup>32</sup> Q. Ahmad, *The Wahabi movement in India*, (1966) 192. 4.

<sup>33</sup> W. Dalrymple, 'In defence of faith. Religious rhetoric in the Delhi uprising of 1857', *Biblio* (March-April 2007) 7-8.

composition of the ghazis, joined, as they were, by urban Muslims in Allahabad, and by peasants in the district of Awadh.<sup>34</sup> Qadir and Atlas also highlight the 'different strata' of Muslims involved in 1857, mentioning specifically 'farmers, landlords, Ulema and Mashaikh' as among those offering 'tough resistance to the English forces' particularly on the North West Frontier. They assert that the British labelled the Muslim resistance fighters as 'Wahabi' while Indians called them mujahidin.<sup>35</sup>

It is certainly the case that the existence of a force of militant Islamic warriors long predated the events of 1857. Accounts of the Afghan wars describe attacks by ghazis from the 1830s onwards.<sup>36</sup> It is also true, particularly in and around Peshawar, that Wahabis like Inayat Ali were heavily involved in organizing actions against the British. According to Ahmad, those villages captured by the rebels were chosen as being 'sympathetic to the Wahabis'. When such villages, including Nawakilla, Shaikh Jana and Narinji were retaken by the British in July 1857, reprisals were therefore enacted against the villagers, numbers of whom were executed. At Narinji, Captain James, the political officer accompanying the British forces, noted 'not a house was spared, even the walls of many were destroyed by elephants (...) the village was soon a mass of ruins'.<sup>37</sup> Here, however, the 'Wahabi forces' were found to include many rebel sepoys from the 55<sup>th</sup> Native Infantry who were identified through their arms and uniforms. It is, of course, unsurprising to find that where the chief rebel actions were being undertaken by Wahabis, the fugitive sepoys should seek to join with those forces. It is also likely that where Muslim villages were destroyed, as in the above examples, the survivors might well be transformed from being Wahabi 'sympathisers' into active ghazi forces.

It is possible that the ranks of the ghazis were swelled by Muslims from various walks of life whose encounters with the British in India during 1857 would have been marked by the latter's increasing tendency to assume that the large majority of the Indian followers of Islam were rebel

---

<sup>34</sup> Clare Anderson, *The Indian uprising of 1857-8: prisons, prisoners and rebellion* (London 2007) 7.

<sup>35</sup> Altaf Qadir and Sabeeha Atlas, 'The War of Independence 1857 and the North West Frontier: The struggle of the Mujahidin against the English' in: Bates ed., *New Perspectives*.

<sup>36</sup> See for example, accounts of encounters with ghazis in R.E. Cholmeley, *John Nicholson the lion of the Punjab* (London) 1908.

<sup>37</sup> Q. Ahmad, *The Wahabi Movement in India*, 184-185.

supporters. Padamsee's work on the correspondence of Alfred Lyall, deputy magistrate in Bulandshahr district in the North-West Provinces, is particularly illustrative in this regard, his letters home reveal his gradual absolution of civilian Hindu involvement in what he rapidly determines to have been a 'conspiracy' between Muslims and sepoys. In his letter of 11 July 1857, for example, he asserts that Muslims 'hate us with a fanatical hate that we never suspected to exist among them, and have everywhere been the leaders in the barbarous murdering and mangling of the Christians'.<sup>38</sup> Muslim civil servants also became suspect. Mark Thornhill, another British official, became critical of the Muslim police in Agra, for example, and cast them as assisting the rebels in his memoirs.<sup>39</sup> The British loss of confidence in Muslims in turn propelled them to flight, leading to further justification for their actual or suspected participation in rebel activities. Thus a vicious cycle was put in place. Some observers were aware of this trend at the time. William Muir pointed out, in a letter to the *Bombay Times* that 'Mahometans both high and low, fled in multitudes from Agra, partly, no doubt, conscience stricken, partly through apprehensions'.<sup>40</sup>

### **The role and significance of ghazis in the uprising**

The great diversity of persons described as ghazis, running into tens of thousands in some secondary historical narrative, presents a stark contrast to the relatively smaller groups of men met so vividly described in first-hand memoirs of fighting in the combat zone. The British accounts of such battlefield encounters stress that the ghazis preferred death to capture. This is underscored, for example by Forbes-Mitchell when he describes a youth who, becoming separated from the rest of the ghazis

---

<sup>38</sup> IOLR MSS Eur MSS F132/3 Papers of Alfred Lyall, as cited in A. Padamsee, 'Ideology and paradox in British Civil Service accounts of Muslim conspiracy in 1857-59' in: Bates ed., *New Perspectives*.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Thornhill, *The Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate during the rise, progress, and suppression of the Indian Mutiny* (London 1884).

<sup>40</sup> William Muir, letter to editor, *Bombay Times*, 20 July, 1857, cited in A. Powell, 'Questionable Loyalties: Muslim Government Servants and Rebellion' in: Bates, *New Perspectives*.

challenged the whole of the line to come out and fight him. He then rushed at Mr Joiner, the quartermaster of the Ninety-Third, firing his carbine, but missing. Mr Joiner returned the fire with his revolver, and the Ghazi then threw away his carbine and rushed at Joiner with his tulwar. Some of the light company tried to take the youngster prisoner, but it was no use; he cut at every one so madly, that they had to bayonet him.<sup>41</sup>

The appraisal of the ghazi as a determined religious martyr finds an echo in the memoirs of Muslims convicted of participating in the uprising, such as Moinil Haq whose account of the siege of Delhi pays tribute to the 'strong and brave Ghazi-Mujahids' who 'kept their feet firm even in hot encounters and met everybody who tried to advance. Many of them tasted the honey of martyrdom'.<sup>42</sup> Faced with the continuing need to accommodate to the British victors, some later nineteenth century Muslim authors, including Zakaullah and Syed Ahmed Khan 'tried to pass over the episode or belittle the signatories of the fatwa' of 1857.<sup>43</sup> Urdu poetry reflects an equally 'bewildering and often contradictory array of opinions'.

Reactions vary from nostalgic lament for a lost age to fixing blame and apportioning responsibility for the terrible misfortunes that had befallen them. Heroes become villains and vice versa: the mutineering soldiers referred to as *mujahid* (martyrs, or those who bear witness) by some, become *balwai* (rioters) for others.<sup>44</sup>

The poet Momin is said to have expressed admiration for the mujahidin leader Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly (1786-1831), whilst accepting a British stipend. As Mushirul Hasan has observed, 'Muslims had to adjust to new realities'.<sup>45</sup>

At the time of the centenary of the Uprising, in 1957, some Pakistani historians sought to re-evaluate the role of the mujahidin in 1857. Ghulam

---

<sup>41</sup> Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny*, Chapter XV.

<sup>42</sup> Haq, *The Story of the War of Independence*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> For a synthesis of these views and accounts see M. Naeem Qureshi, 'What Really Happened in 1857? A Synthesis of the Pakistani Perspectives on the Uprising in Urdu Literature' in: Bates, *New Perspectives*.

<sup>44</sup> Rakhshanda Jalil, 'Reflections of 1857 in Contemporary Urdu Literature' in: Bates, *New Perspectives*.

<sup>45</sup> M. Hasan, in: Bates, *New Perspectives*.

Rasul Mihr's *1857: Pak-o Hind ki pehli jang-i azadi* [Indo-Pakistan First Freedom Struggle], took the view that the Uprising was an attempt to further the movement for jihad begun by Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly, and only failed because Delhi-based 'ulema did not support a jihad at that juncture'.<sup>46</sup> Historians since then have generally acknowledged the presence of Islamic revivalist groups during the Uprising,<sup>47</sup> but they have chiefly been concerned with the jihadis' part in the failure of the revolt. Clare Anderson, for example, describes the presence of militant ghazis in Delhi, Allahabad, Awadh and Hyderabad, but concludes that they 'never presented a serious threat because theological and broader social divisions hampered leadership, organization, and unity'.<sup>48</sup> Ray and Chaudhuri analyse the Fath Islam and other rebel proclamations, principally in order to demonstrate flaws in their tactical operations, for example, the concentration on Delhi, Lucknow and Bareilly.<sup>49</sup> Qadir and Atlas identify a number of failings in both the tactics and the ideology of the mujahidin, who lacked military training, and supplies, but above all contends that 'their dream of a true Islamic rule (...) was not acceptable to the major portion of the Indian population'.<sup>50</sup>

In the wake of globally significant events like 9/11, and the discussion of a new 'clash of civilizations' the religious role of the mujahids in the 1857 conflict has been given new importance in the work of some writers. William Dalrymple, for example, told a BBC news interviewer on 6th September 2006 that

there are clear and specific references among the Mutiny Papers to a regiment of jihadis arriving in Delhi from Gwalior who are described as suicide ghazis who had vowed never to eat again and to fight until

---

<sup>46</sup> A synthesis of Mihr's views is given in M.N. Qureshi, 'What Really Happened in 1857? A Synthesis of the Pakistani Perspectives on the Uprising in Urdu Literature'.

<sup>47</sup> A. Padamsee, *Representations of Indian Muslims in British colonial discourse* (2005) discusses this issue in detail.

<sup>48</sup> Clare Anderson, *The Indian uprising of 1857-8*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> R K Ray and N Chaudhuri, '1857: Historical Works and Proclamations', unpublished paper at conference on 'Historiography and pedagogy of the Indian Uprising', Royal Asiatic Society, London, July 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Qadir and Atlas, 'The War of Independence 1857'.



they met death at the hands of the kafirs [infidels] ‘for those who have come to die have no need for food.’<sup>51</sup>

Elsewhere, Dalrymple has further articulated his view of 1857 as a ‘religious war’, drawing attention to the ‘emphatically religious articulation’ of rebel proclamations which refer to the British not in terms of nationality or race, but as ‘kafirs [infidels] and nasrani [Christians]’. Similarly, he observes, the Christians, both in Delhi and in Britain indulged in ‘extreme rhetoric’ with the thirst for revenge usually articulated as a God-given right. He concludes that while religion was not the only force at work in 1857, its ‘power and importance’, above all in justifying the Uprising, is borne out by the documents he has studied.<sup>52</sup>

The positing of 1857 as a clash of ‘rival fundamentalisms’ with evangelical Christians on one side and Wahabis on the other has been criticised as a re-reading of historical events with a flawed modern hindsight. Part of the blame for this has been placed at the feet of W.W. Hunter, who was commissioned by the Governor-General to write a report concerning the loyalty of Muslims in 1870. This followed the publication of William Muir’s *Life of Mahomet*, in four volumes between 1859 and 1861, which traduced the entire moral ethics of Islam. Hunter’s report was based largely on his encounters with Wahabis in the peasant areas of Eastern Bengal. Published under the title *The Indian Musulmans* in 1871, Hunter’s study exaggerated and demonised the influence of conservative Wahabi Islam throughout India: an interpretation which shocked Muslim contemporaries.<sup>53</sup>

The influence of this text has persisted ever since, but considerable work has been done by historians to qualify Hunter’s generalisations. Farhat Hasan, for example, has argued that jihad did not connote a ‘religious war’ at all in 1857, but rather meant a fight against injustice. He cites as evidence the fact that the term was used both by Hindus and Muslims. Hasan also

---

<sup>51</sup> W. Dalrymple, ‘Indian mutiny was “war of religion”’, *BBC News: South Asia* (news.bbc.co.uk) Wednesday, 6 September 2006.

<sup>52</sup> W. Dalrymple, ‘In defence of faith. Religious rhetoric in the Delhi uprising of 1857’, *Biblio* March–April 2007) 6–9. A more sensational version of this argument was presented by Charles Allen, *God’s terrorists: the Wabbabi cult and the hidden roots of modern jihad* (2006).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, the views of Maulana Jafer Thanesri, summarised by Seema Alavi in M. Carter and C. Bates ed., *1857: Global Perspectives* (New Delhi 2009).

points out that ghazis and jihadis cannot be equated with Wahabis, who were divided on the issue of rebellion. Not all ghazis were followers of the Wahabi movement; he clarifies that 'those based in Allahabad, Lucknow and Gwalior largely identified themselves not with the Wahabi leadership, but various mystic orders.' Ahmadullah Shah, for example, the leader of the ghazis and the jihadis at Lucknow, although inspired by Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly, was not himself a Wahabi, but a sufi saint of the Qadiri order.<sup>54</sup>

The Wahabis themselves reacted to 1857 in a variety of ways. The ethos of the movement was to migrate from British controlled areas, so as to better resist the movement from the outside. Consequently, the strategy of the Wahabis in Patna, and elsewhere in British India was, according to Ahmad, 'the collection of men and materials and their transmission to the Frontier'. Nevertheless, at certain points, the movement intersected with other rebel forces – their contacts in princely states such as Tonk and Hyderabad were emulated by some rebel leaders, and in a few instances they took over leadership roles. However, the Islamic forces often also showed a very practical willingness to work with other groups – letters seized by the British between Pir Ali and 'Mashuazzaman' for example stressed 'I think we should not disagree with any caste and even with Hindoos for we should try and get our work done and in disagreeing there are countless disputes.'<sup>55</sup> It has been asserted that

there was no contradiction at all in 1857 between the sepoys, jihadis and the Emperor as far as their political commitments were concerned. Indeed each invoked different intellectual arsenals to mobilise and galvanise support ... The histories of both Hindu and Islamic derived anti-British struggles need to be integrated to the larger narrative of both 1857, and anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, while all resistance fighters, whether jihadis or Hindu rebel leaders or sepoys 'unproblematically used religious idioms and symbols to whip up anti-British support', we should not necessarily read into these later appraisals of 'fundamentalism' and hence incompatibility with co-existence and tolerance.

---

<sup>54</sup> Farhat Hasan, 'Religious Shade of a Rebellion', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 May 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Q. Ahmad, *The Wahabi movement in India* (1966) 216-220.

<sup>56</sup> S. Alavi, 'Jihadi Muslims and Hindu sepoys. Re-writing the 1857 narrative', *Biblio* (March-April 2007).

The Christian ‘fundamentalism’ of the British in 1857 needs also to be nuanced. Padamsee’s careful re-reading of the letters and memoirs of men like Alfred Lyell and Mark Thornhill reveals an interesting process through which the British increasingly seek to limit the number of Indians who should be blamed. Thus, by mid August 1857 Lyall is noting ‘I do not bear any spite against the Hindoos (excepting the sepoys) and I am always rather sorry to see them killed’, and by 26 September he is writing that even the ‘Hindoo sepoys’ are ‘guiltless’ of all atrocities.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, in 1858, William Edwards, Judge and Collector of Budaon in Rohilkhand, seeks to exculpate large segments of the Muslims from the charge of being jihadis, concluding that the ‘rural classes [who joined rebellion with the sepoys] could not have been acted upon by any cry of their religion in danger’.<sup>58</sup> There is a possibility that Edwards’ dismissal of Muslim peasants as having potential or actual jihadist tendencies was based upon his own arrogant perception of them as easily manipulated. However, on a pragmatic level, in order to continue to maintain an effective Raj, it was necessary for the British had to disculpate the vast majority of the population from the charge of treason.

The turning of a blind eye to a whole raft of individuals who might have been suspected of complicity in the revolt is surely the best explanation for the deafening silence from the sugar-plantation colonies (such as Mauritius and Guyana) who were in receipt of large numbers of Hindus and Muslims from the heartlands of revolt in the years following the Uprising. As Salahuddin Malik has concluded,

British interpretations of the Muslim dimension of the revolt, together with their assessment of it as a civil as well as military uprising, reflected both political expediencies of the colonial state and the realities of the conflict as it unfolded in India.<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, such interpretations were being re-articulated even as the events themselves unfolded. As Powell has argued,

---

<sup>57</sup> A. Padamsee, ‘Ideology and paradox in British Civil Service accounts’, *pagenumbers?*

<sup>58</sup> William Edwards, *Personal adventures during the Indian Rebellion in Rohilkund, Futtehghur, and Oude* (London 1858) 7.

<sup>59</sup> S. Malik, ‘Politics and polemics of popular British interpretations of 1857 in India’ in: Bates ed., *New Perspectives*.

a much less hysterical narrative was being formulated by some on-the-spot British civilians concerning Muslim patterns of behaviour, both alleged and real, than the later dominance of 'conspiracy theory' would seem to allow.<sup>60</sup>

### Islam and the 1857 legacy: concluding comments

Historians on the subcontinent still project differing and contradictory interpretations of 1857 – from the notion of it as a 'war of national independence' or of national liberation, to more partisan Muslim accounts of it as the culmination of the struggles of men like Tipu Sultan or Sayyid Ahmad of Rae Bareilly.<sup>61</sup> For some Muslims, the legacy of 1857 is seen in the flourishing Deobandi tradition; it certainly, as Alavi points out, introduced a new category of 'mujahid wahabi convict' to that particular movement.<sup>62</sup> We are bound to conclude that just as we remain reliant on partisan and partial accounts of the events of the 1857 Uprising, so we are still lacking detailed and certain knowledge of who joined the ranks of the ghazis, and what their motivations in so doing, might have been. However, the evidence of this article serves to underline the serious dangers that lie in reading too much into the past under the influence of the political priorities and prejudices of the present.

---

<sup>60</sup> A. Powell, 'Marginal Muslims: maulawis, munsifs, munshis and others' in: Bates ed., *New Perspectives*.

<sup>61</sup> See Qureshi, 'What Really Happened in 1857?' for a synthesis of these debates.

<sup>62</sup> S. Alavi, 'Travel and the nation: Maulana Jafer Thanesi as a mutiny convict', in: M. Carter and C. Bates ed., *1857: Global Perspectives* (New Delhi 2009).