

MANGAL PANDEY: DRUG-CRAZED FANATIC OR CANNY REVOLUTIONARY?

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ABSTRACT:

A disjuncture exists between popular conceptions and professional historians' evaluation of the significance of Mangal Pandey to both the rebellion of 1857 and the subsequent genealogy of Indian nationalism. In popular memory he is *Amar Shaheed*, or immortal martyr, and first hero of the Indian independence movement. On the other hand, most historians regard his actions as little more than random, drug-fuelled violence. This paper attempts to recontextualize our understanding of Mangal Pandey's agency through "against the grain" readings of colonial sources and discourses. It finds that, although often exaggerated, popular narratives probably come closer to the truth, while also concluding that both levels of historical consciousness have been unduly beholden to orientalist and colonialist constructions, including an over-emphasis on religious causes of the rebellion.

Introduction

Mangal Pandey's insurrection at the military cantonment of Barrackpore on Sunday the 29th of March, 1857, is the subject of intense historiographical debate. Several issues arising from a resurgence of interest in this relatively obscure event highlight a range of intersecting dynamics influencing contemporary Indian and South Asian politics and society. Against the current backdrop of a culturally ascendant, though contested, ideology of Hindutva - according to which authentic citizenship of the modern nation state of India is effectively reserved for Hindus - the celebration of Brahmin sepoy Mangal Pandey as the nation's first religio-nationalist martyr cannot be viewed as a politically neutral gesture. On another level, until very recent times, there has been a lack of official recognition of his role in the 1857 rebellion, at least in the form of public memorializations. This is a striking omission in a country where monuments depicting elite freedom fighters saturate the landscape of major urban centers. This situation suggests that the post-independence nation state has been at best uncomfortable with advertizing to the subversive potential of the subaltern rank and file.

Historians have been at great variance in interpreting Mangal Pandey's significance, often in ways that reflect ideological presuppositions - be they colonialist, anti-colonial or post-colonial nationalist, Marxist or subalternist. He has been both dismissed as no more than a drug-crazed fanatic with little, if any, bearing on the subsequent uprising, and valorized as the first in a chain of noble martyrs who consciously laid down their lives in the cause of a fully-fledged national movement. This paper plies a middle course between these two extreme positions.¹

Firstly, it establishes, via a mostly straightforward reading of the available evidence, the strong likelihood of Mangal Pandey having acted in association and collaboration with activist sepoys who sought to instigate an uprising against the British. This point has been vigorously denied by generations of colonialist scholars, and more recently by several post-independence writers who appear to have resorted to such positions from an understandable wariness towards the hysteria of nationalistic myth making. Nonetheless, if the original sources considered in this paper are taken together and appreciated in context, there can be little doubt that the belief in Mangal Pandey having acted alone is a relic of the wishful thinking of the British establishment in the moments immediately prior to the explosions of 1857.

More importantly, however, this paper borrows substantially from methods pioneered by the subaltern studies collective, to make an against-the-grain reading of colonial sources and discourse, in order to speculate as to the motives and agency of Pandey and his fellow sepoys who acted or failed to act on the afternoon of the 29th of March, 1857. Subaltern agency is, of course, to a very large extent irretrievable and often ultimately unknowable. Nonetheless, this approach allows us to position such ambiguous agency within a social, political and indeed cultural context, in such a way as to allow us to draw conclusions that are at least plausible, if not definitive.

Specifically, this paper takes the Mangal Pandey incident as a case in point and uses it to add a voice to that relatively recent and small body of scholarship on

¹ This paper is a preliminary version of a thesis-in-progress undertaken for partial fulfillment of the Bachelor of Arts with Honors in History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I would like to acknowledge financial support from the University Research Council, the Regents and Presidential Scholarship and the Ishi Sakurai Scholarship, which allowed me to conduct research in India during summer 2009. Thanks to Professor Ned Bertz for reading and commenting extensively on earlier drafts, and to my wife Lorinda for her constant support.

1857 that has begun to correct the over-emphasis on native fears of loss of caste and religion as the underlying cause of the rebellion against British rule.² This dominant view coincided neatly with the legitimizing rhetoric of colonialism's civilizing mission, and has been built upon evidence drawn uncritically from colonial sources. Consistent privileging of the role of religious nationalism in 1857 has resulted in the accretion over time of a historical consciousness on both sides of the colonial divide that has become as difficult and awkward to challenge, as it is destructive and divisive, in more ways than one.

To be more explicit, the dominant British discourse at the moment of his rebellion and execution, chose to interpret Mangal Pandey as a drug-crazed fanatic. Indeed, as we shall see, an early newspaper report of the incident characterized him as having "heavily drugged himself and run amok."³ The latter term is derived from imperial experiences further east in Malaya, where natives were perceived to have willingly surrendered self-control in a final ritual act of socially-prescribed, public suicide. The extent to which the cultural institution of "amok" was a colonial invention in Southeast Asia is the subject of considerable academic debate beyond the scope of this paper. What is important here is that such notions were prominent in the minds of the British who prosecuted and condemned Mangal Pandey. It is also quite likely that the concept was also familiar to the sepoys themselves. Some of those present at Barrackpore in 1857 probably served across the *Kala Pani* in the British Straits Settlements and thus had direct experience of British perceptions of the practice, if not of the practice itself, making it possible that Mangal Pandey consciously interacted with such discourse at his trial.

In the tense moments between Mangal Pandey's rebellion and execution and the subsequent conflagration of the wider uprising, the British establishment was unprepared for the impending crisis. To be sure, there were those among the British who wrote fervent letters and editorials in broadsheets such as the *Bengal Hurkaru*, even before Pandey's rebellion, urging the authorities to take the potential for an imminent uprising seriously. Yet, the general tenor of the official position was one of ignorance born of arrogance. This is reflected in the over-confident tone evinced in much of the official correspondence relating to the cartridges or for example in Major-General Hearsay's account of his address to the remaining brigade on the morning of the disbandment of the 19th Regiment of the Native Infantry (N.I.), and reproductions in the press of the same.⁴ At its apogee, the Company Raj had become so sure of its ability

² David Washbrook recently identified "British class and racial arrogance carried to the point of strategic imbecility" as being as important as Evangelical Christianity in provoking the revolt, in "Popular History Versus Academic History," *Revisiting 1857: Myth, Memory, History*, eds. Sharmistha Goopta and Boria Majumdar (New Delhi: Roli Books, 2007), 9. Meanwhile, Saul David, after a close analysis of contemporary sources concludes that the protestations over the greased cartridges were merely a "canard" or "pretext" used to mobilize rebellion, in "Greased Cartridges and the Great Mutiny of 1857: A Pretext to Rebel or the Final Straw?" in *War and Society in Colonial India*, ed. Kaushik Roy (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006), 101-103. By contrast, William Dalrymple's *the Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), and Nile Green's *Islam and the Colonial Army in India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009) are examples of recent scholarship which have accepted religious sentiments as the primary cause of the sepoy rebellion.

³ *Bengal Hurkaru*, March 31st, 1857.

⁴ *The Trial of Mangal Pandey: State Papers*, ed. Leela Sarup (New Delhi: Niyogi, 2007), 111. This work reproduces a portion of G.W. Forrest, *The Indian Mutiny 1857-58: Selections from the Letters, Despatches, and Other State Papers*, Vol.1 (Lahore: Sang-E-Meel Publications, 2006), originally published 1893. See also, "Military Gazette," *Bengal Hurkaru*, Tuesday, April 7th, 1857. Hearsey was in command of the cantonment at Barrackpore, and oversaw the disbandment of the 19th and 34th Regiments of the

to command that it failed to recognize the inevitability of the crisis this arrogance had engendered. Rather than recognizing Pandey's act of defiance as a symptom of widely-felt dissatisfaction with the various injustices of Company rule, the British chose to understand him as simply another product of the primitive native culture bequeathed to them by destiny to rule over. In evaluating Pandey's rebellion in terms of his motivations and its later significance, we must keep in mind that everything that was said by Pandey and others involved in his trial, was framed by the power of the colonial state. Rather than interpreting Pandey's laconic silences as evidence that he was not motivated by larger concerns such as patriotism or nationalism, this paper will attempt to outline how we might, given a range of contextual factors, interpret this silence as a strategic response to specific colonialist assumptions. This approach opens the way for us to at least consider the possibility that his reticence to speak at greater length at the court martial was motivated by his solidarity with the movement that was clearly swelling up beneath him, and which would project him into history.

After surveying some key components of the existing historiography of Mangal Pandey and 1857, offering a brief narrative of "the event" for which he is famous, and embarking on a fairly straightforward appeal to the evidence demonstrating his likely connections to the wider rebellion, this paper turns to a discussion of the wider context of some relatively neglected aspects of Mangal Pandey's representation in history and memory: the growing alienation between officers and sepoys, the fact that he was said to be heavily intoxicated at the moment of his rebellion, and the notion that he "ran amok." With such context in mind, an interpretation is advanced here that salvages the significance of Mangal Pandey's valorous sacrifice, but places it within a solidarity more immediate than the lofty (and divisive) religious nationalism with which it is often associated.

Historiographical Background: Causes of the Rebellion

Colonial histories of 1857 were dominated by the notion that the rebellion was prompted by fears of loss of caste and religion in the face of a British conspiracy to pollute soldiers with tainted cartridges, alongside increasing legislative interference with native customs, even as more and more Christian missionaries were operating throughout the country. This tradition clearly betrays a political agenda, serving to buttress the colonialist's legitimizing claims about South Asian culture being backwardly beholden to superstition and thus in need of the enlightening hand of European governance. Intriguingly, even tragically, this emphasis on the role of religion has been shared by many nationalist authors writing in the tradition pioneered by V.D. Savarkar.⁵ In what surely amounts to a "derivative discourse", to use Partha Chatterjee's phrase,⁶ Savarkar sought to reclaim Mangal Pandey from ignominy and lift him to the status of *shaheed*, or religious martyr. The remainder of this section seeks to survey some key components of the literature speculating on the causes of the uprising and to bring these perspectives

Native Army, and the execution of Mangal Pandey.

5 Vinya Damodar Savarkar, *The Indian War of Independence, 1857* (Bombay: Dhwale, 1947 (1909)). Seminal post-colonial nationalist interpretations emphasizing a religious dimension include S.N Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1958), and R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962-63).

6 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

into greater conversation with the Mangal Pandey incident.

Writing contemporaneously with the events of 1857-58 were authors of as divergent ideological persuasions as Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli, not to mention the rebellious authors of the “Azimgarh Proclamation” themselves. All argued against the prevailing tide of opinion that the uprising could be understood primarily as a question of military discipline relating to superstitions about problematic ammunition. This dominant supposition, which would come to inform much of the colonial historiography of the “Mutiny”, is exemplified by the writings of M.R. Gubbins, an official who served on the British Commission to Awadh at the time of its annexation in 1856. Gubbins reflected on the causes of “the mutinies in Oudh” in a publication released in 1858. Although cognizant of the diversity of arguments being put forward as to reasons for the uprising - Gubbins enumerates several, and promptly counters them with the authoritative weight of first-hand experience - ultimately Gubbins accords primacy to the primitive nature of “the Indian religious mind”. He writes, “I conceive that the native mind had been gradually alarmed on the vital subjects of caste and religion, when the spark was applied by the threatened introduction of the greased cartridge...” Echoing Disraeli, (from whom we will shortly hear), he declaims the stupidity of the government’s policies regarding native education, which he believed had fostered widely held suspicions among the native population that plans were afoot for the forced conversion of the native populace. He insists, “Suspicion ever marks the barbaric mind.”⁷

Published in the name of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah on the 25th of August, 1857, the “Azimgarh Proclamation” is one of few surviving documents written during the uprising that espouses the revolutionary cause.⁸ Although this call to arms is couched in religious rhetoric, with the British government repeatedly described as infidel and the rebels as “*Majahadeen*”, the substantive claims of the document all relate to the material misrule of the Company. It is accused of arbitrary and corrupt handling of zamindari (land tenure) settlements, and of persevering with an unjust monopoly in the trade of “all the fine and valuable merchandise, such as indigo, cloth, and other articles of shipping, leaving only the trade in trifles to the people,” with even those trifles being subject to onerous taxation and stamp duties. Finally, the Company is accused of depriving natives employed in the civil and military services of “posts of dignity” or opportunities for advancement beyond the lowest of glass ceilings. One may speculate that the appeal to religion in this instance was little more than emotive rhetoric employed in order to ennable more mundane concerns. Indeed, loyalist Syed Ahmad Khan, a respected Muslim scholar employed by the East India Company as a judge, rejected religious motivations but stressed rising taxes, seizure of lands and loss of state sovereignty, and the generally arbitrary rule of Company administration as more basic factors in his pamphlet *The Causes of Indian Revolt*, written in 1857, though not published until 1873.⁹

Disraeli, as leading spokesman for the opposition in the House of Commons, used this moment of strife in India opportunistically to attack the incumbent Palmerston government, arguing that the rebellion stemmed from a deep discontent among the general Indian population with the East India Company’s “increasing tendency to

⁷ M.R. Gubbins, *The Mutinies in Oudh* (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1978), 76-77.

⁸ Ainslie Embree, *1857 in India: Mutiny or War of Independence* (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1963), 2.

⁹ Syed Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt (1857)* (Lahore: The Book House, 1970).

interfere with the established rules and customs.”¹⁰ Disraeli focused his criticism on three aspects of government policy. Governor-General Dalhousie’s doctrine of lapse, which deprived Indian royalty of their customary privilege of naming successors in the absence of biological heirs, he argued, had dangerously eroded the trust and loyalty of native sovereigns. Similarly, he attacked the folly of the government’s aggressive policy of annexation, as carried out most recently and to disastrous effect in the Kingdom of Awadh, from whence many sepoys in the Bengal Army, including Mangal Pandey, had been recruited:

The Oude Sepoy finds that he has no village to return to, where he is to live the favoured subject of his native Sovereign... The Oude Sepoy returns now to his village, and finds it belongs to the Company, and that the rigid system of revenue is applied to his small property... He finds that he has lost political privileges and his territorial position; and for the first time, the greater body of the Bengal Army is disaffected.¹¹

The third plank in Disraeli’s argument was, in fact, more or less in tune with the dominant explanation for the uprising as I have characterized it, that is, the Company’s complicity in the “tampering with the religion of the people.”¹² While recognizing that official Company policy ostensibly upheld the value of protection of freedom of religion, Disraeli insisted that the Company legislation had in fact been “constantly nibbling at the religious system of the natives.”¹³ He cited the presence of the “Sacred Scriptures” of Christianity in the national system of education, the promotion of female education, widow remarriage and laws allowing religious converts to inherit property as evidence of his assertions.

Marx, in contrast to Disraeli, understood the rebellion in wider terms than the specificities of British misrule in India. In his analysis, first published in *The New York Daily Tribune* on June 30, 1857, the revolt in the Bengal Army was, “beyond doubt, intimately connected with the Persian and Chinese wars,” and plainly represented a “national revolt.”¹⁴ For Marx, the causes of this national disaffection lay in the “the only social revolution ever heard of in Asia.” The source of this revolution was to be found, in his view, in the “...destruction, through free trade, [of] the domestic handicraft industry in India.”¹⁵ While fears of loss of religion played their part, according to Marx, such fears were ultimately merely symptomatic and certainly not at the root of the conflict.

Leaping forward to a significant 20th century interpretation, we find Eric Stokes advancing an explanation that combines elements of the dominant interpretation centered on religion, with a more materialist understanding of the colonial social order.¹⁶ Indeed, in some ways, Stokes’ view reads like an amalgam of Disraeli and Marx! According to Stokes, fears of loss of caste resulting from the use of the greased cartridge, though probably genuine, cannot wholly account for the sepoy rebellion, since native troops willingly used the Enfield rifle and its offensive cartridges to fight the British

10 Embree, *1857 in India*, 4.

11 Ibid., 11.

12 Ibid., 6.

13 Ibid., 9.

14 Karl Marx, “The Revolt in the Indian Army,” *The First Indian War of Independence, 1857-1859* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1959), 40.

15 Ibid., 20.

16 Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: the Indian Revolt of 1857* (NY: Oxford UP, 1983), 50.

during the subsequent outbreak of hostilities. Rather, Stokes contends that fear of a different kind , namely that of loss of status and privileges of the kind that we have seen postulated by Disraeli, was the more powerful motivating factor in the rebellion. Unlike the armies of the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, the Bengal army had traditionally followed a policy of recruiting almost exclusively from among high-caste peasantry, mostly from the regions of Awadh and Bihar. Reforms and reorganization initiated over the course of the decade or so leading up to 1857 gradually eroded this near monopoly, with increasing numbers of Punjabis and Nepali Gurkhas entering service after the respective annexation and pacification of those regions. The 1856 General Service Enlistment Order was a further source of concern for these high-caste peasant soldiers as it required all recruits to be available for deployment across the Kala Pani, duty that had previously been drafted only of volunteers.

Despite Stokes' insightful revision of the social and political factors underlying the supposedly religiously-minded mutiny, two recent monographs dealing with the Mangal Pandey incident have rather predictably fore-grounded religion as the prime factor. This shared acceptance of the centrality of religion is however, roughly the extent of their common ground. On the one hand, Oxford-trained historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee's 2005 *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero?* is an attempt to stem the tide of Savarkarian nationalist hysteria that has sought to find in retellings of the events of 1857-58 a glorious "Indian war of independence". While accepting at face value the importance of the greased cartridges and fears of loss of religion and caste, he argues not only that it is grossly anachronistic to understand Pandey's actions in terms of national aspirations, but that there is little to connect his solo rebellion and execution with the subsequent outbreak at Meerut some weeks later.¹⁷ In valiantly seeking to undermine the worst excesses of nationalist mythography, Mukherjee runs the risk of reviving the very colonial structures of power that originally undermined indigenous forms of knowledge.

At almost the opposite end of the spectrum, Amaresh Misra produced a work in the same year purporting to tell "the true story of an Indian Revolutionary."¹⁸ Unabashedly following Savarkar's nationalist agenda, Misra reconstructs a narrative of Pandey's life, using "indigenous sources" composed in the Awadhi dialect of Hindustani, such as the *Aalha Mangal Pandey* ("Ballad of Mangal Pandey") and the *Faizabad ka Itibaas* ("History of Faizabad"). Misra, in no uncertain terms, asserts that Pandey was a nationalist and religious martyr with connections to a conspiracy to revolt against the British, who knowingly sacrificed himself in order to set the attempted revolution in motion. While Misra's lack of credentials as a historian leads one to approach his work with a measure of skepticism, especially in terms of his handling of the historicity and citation of his sources, it is nonetheless impressive that he sought to look past British representations of the event and attempt to portray Mangal Pandey from an Indian perspective using Indian-produced sources.

Attempts to authenticate texts such as the *Aalha Mangal Pandey* according to academic standards may prove fruitless. It may be, partly because they presumably stem from oral traditions committed to written form substantially after their initial composition, that the type of historical consciousness they represent is inconsistent with verifiable standards of empirical "truth". Nonetheless, some recognition and

¹⁷ Mukherjee, *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr*, 52.
¹⁸ Misra, *Mangal Pandey: The True Story*.

incorporation of the perspectives they offer is surely in order.¹⁹

The Event as Portrayed in the British State Papers

An account of Mangal Pandey's rebellion as it emerges from records of his court martial trial, and other official British sources, can be reconstructed as follows.²⁰ Late, between 4 and 6pm, in the afternoon of Sunday the 29th of March, 1857, Mangal Pandey, sepoy, No. 1446, 5th Company, 34th Regiment, Native Infantry, entered the parade ground in front of the "sepoy lines" (or barracks) at the military cantonment of Barrackpore, some 15 miles from Calcutta. The cantonment awaited the imminent arrival of the 19th Regiment which had been ordered to march from Berhampore, and was to be disbanded as punishment for its collective refusal to train with the greased cartridges for the new Enfield rifle. Pandey appeared on the parade ground wearing his regimental red jacket with a dhoti instead of the regulation pantaloons, and carried his musket and *talwar*, or curved sword. He ordered the drummer, John Lewis, to sound the assembly, and seeing a sepoy nearby, is alleged to have asked, "Why are you not getting ready? It is for our religion." He marched up and down the parade ground, exhorting his fellows to, "Come out you *bhainchutes*, the Europeans are here.²¹ From biting these cartridges, we shall become infidels. Get ready, turn out all of you."

Pandey fired upon the first European to arrive on the scene, Sergeant-Major James Hewson, but the shot missed. Hewson took cover behind the "bell of arms," a bell-shaped structure for storing arms and ammunition located on the parade ground. Shortly after, the Adjutant, Lieutenant Bempde Henry Baugh rode onto the ground on his horse. Pandey took aim and fired, wounding the horse, which collapsed. Having been helped free of the stricken animal by sepoy Sheikh Paltoo, Baugh fired a pistol at Pandey who was now reloading his musket, but this shot also missed. Baugh and Hewson then advanced upon Pandey with drawn swords, calling on the quarter-guard to load their weapons and assist in arresting the sepoy. They did not comply. Pandey stopped loading his musket and drew his own talwar. In the ensuing melee, Baugh and Hewson both received serious wounds from Pandey's talwar. In addition, Hewson and Baugh were both struck several times from behind with rifle butts wielded by unknown sepoys. Sheikh Paltoo, the only Indian to actively support the British officers during the melee, restrained Pandey by holding him around his waist, until threatened with death by the other sepoys. Paltoo's assistance afforded the two British officers an opportunity to retreat from the scene.

Shortly afterward, the commanding officer of the cantonment, Major-General J.B. Hearsey arrived on horseback with several other British officers, finding large

¹⁹ Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, & Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600-1800* (New York: Other Press, 2003). In this work, supposedly ahistorical texts are read with sensitivity to the literary context and cultural milieu in which they were produced, thus yielding valuable historical insights. Such a method, applied to folk literature like that identified by Misra, may enable us to reasonably ascribe greater agency to Mangal Pandey than Mukherjee, for one, currently deems appropriate.

²⁰ The narrative presented here is drawn from a composite of sources found in *The Trial of Mangal Pandey: State Papers*, Ed. Leela Sarup; official correspondence and the records of judiciary proceedings, such as the separate trials of Mangal Pandey and the Jemadar Issuree Pandey, and further inquiries made into the conduct of Sheikh Paltoo and the general state of affairs in the 34th N.I. in the early months of 1857.

²¹ This refers to the arrival of a small force of 50 British troops by steamer for the purposes of overseeing the disarming of the 19th Regiment. *Bhainchute* is a decidedly derogatory term in Hindustani.

numbers of men (estimated 400) turned out in varying states of dress. Pandey was marching back and forth in front of them with his musket in hand, “calling on the men of the brigade to join him to defend and die for their religion and caste.” Hearsey, his two sons and several other armed British officers approached Pandey on horseback at a quickening pace. Pandey aimed his musket at his own breast and using his toe, released the trigger. The bullet made a “deep graze, ripping up the muscles of his chest, shoulder and neck, and he fell prostrate.” The *jemadar* and a sepoy were instructed to put out the fire which was burning his regimental jacket and shirt, which they did.²²

Pandey was taken into custody and given medical attention until the date of his trial by general court martial a little over a week later on the 6th of April. He was found guilty of mutiny and violence against his superior officers by all fourteen of the native *subedars* serving on the jury, and was sentenced, by a vote of eleven out of fourteen, “to suffer death by being hanged by the neck until he be dead.”²³ This sentence was carried out in front of the brigade at 5:30 am on the 8th of April.

A Refutation of Mukherjee’s “Accidental Hero” Thesis

There is no evidence to justify the view that this sepoy was a martyr and hero who decided to die with honor, betraying none of his co-conspirators, and expressing no regret or remorse. But this is precisely the status that has been endowed on Mangal Pandey by nationalists in India. V.D. Savarkar hailed him as shahid, as the man who started it all – the first rebel of 1857 who lit the spark. He is placed in the Valhalla of martyrs who died for their motherland and freedom. Nationalism everywhere makes its own myths, and Mangal Pandey has become part of that imagination. Clio, where she clearly and self-consciously demarcates her own terrain from Mythos, has to distance herself from that imagination. Mangal Pandey had no notion of patriotism or even of India.²⁴

Thus argues Rudrangshu Mukherjee in his 2005 work, *Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero?* Mukherjee completely rejects the notion that Mangal Pandey’s rebellion can be reasonably viewed as having a causal relationship with the outbreak at Meerut, a thousand miles to the west, a month and a half later. The two events are separated by too vast a gulf in both time and space, he argues, for them to be linked by responsible historians. He rightly, though perhaps with misplaced emphasis, notes that, “statements by rebellious sepoys are not many, but those that exist do not speak of Mangal Pandey and Barrackpore.”²⁵ The metaphor of Meerut as the “trigger,” rather than of Mangal Pandey as having “lit the spark,” is, for him, more satisfactory.²⁶

And yet, in some respects this position seems inconsistent with some of his own interpretations, following Subalternist and Gramscian thinking, of Mangal Pandey’s agency and solidarity with his fellow sepoys. In an earlier article entitled, “The Sepoy

²² A *Jemadar* was a low-ranking junior officer in the native army.

²³ The rank of *Subedar* was the highest attainable by a native soldier in the Bengal Army.

²⁴ Mukherjee, 2005.

²⁵ Ibid, 63.

²⁶ Savarkar’s original use of the phrase “lit the spark” has been widely taken up in the rhetoric of popular retellings of the Mangal Pandey legend, whereas Mukherjee and others look to the Meerut uprising as inaugurating the official beginning of the rebellion of 1857.

Mutinies Revisited,” he recognizes that,

...before Mangal Pandey decided to act, there had been midnight meetings in Barrackpore which had been attended by sepoys from different regiments... During his trial, Mangal Pandey steadfastly refused, in a remarkable show of solidarity, to name the sepoys who were implicated. He had only one answer: that he acted on his own. His reiteration of his own responsibility for his actions can be read as an attempt to shield the reality, which was the exact opposite of an individual acting on his own. The collective aspect was again made evident when the sepoys of the 34th, Mangal Pandey’s regiment, trampled their caps on the ground when they were disarmed, a gesture of protest carried out collectively, which would in a month’s time transform itself to more violent and concrete forms.²⁷

One might surmise that Mukherjee’s shift in interpretation stems from the emergence, in the interim, of a virulent brand of nationalism which has made the prospect of celebrating Mangal Pandey as a self-sacrificing religio-nationalist warrior less than palatable. Nonetheless, the evidence is highly suggestive that, far from being an isolated actor, Mangal Pandey’s actions were spurred by a shared consciousness and occurred in the context of widespread, collective planning for anti-British action. Despite the lack of statements by rebellious sepoys citing him by name, Mangal Pandey’s example undoubtedly served at the very least as an indirect inspiration for rebellion.

Certainly, the British hoped to make a cautionary example of Mangal Pandey and the Jemadar, Issuree Pandey, who was also executed, having been found guilty of ordering the sepoys of the quarter-guard neither to restrain Mangal Pandey nor go to the aid of the officers he attacked. On the 20th of April, the secretary of Commander-in-Chief of the Bengal Army wrote,

The extreme punishment of military law has been justly awarded, and General Anson trusts that the enormity of the crime will be regarded with horror by every native officer, non-commissioned officer, and soldier of his army. Should, however, there be any still undetected, who have looked on with apathy or passive encouragement at the act of mutiny of which the jemadar has been found guilty, his ignominious end, and that of Sepoy Mungul Pandy, will be a warning to them of the fate that awaits all mutineers, and which General Anson would fain hope will have a beneficial influence on their conduct.²⁸

Word of these executions would have been widely promulgated before the native soldiery of the Bengal Army via the recently established telegraph network. Even where communications were not intended for the ears of the native army, it seems reasonable that leakages must have occurred occasionally in a system so dependent upon native labor. Although the British monopoly of the telegraph ultimately proved to be a decisive advantage during the war,²⁹ we can safely assume that sepoys were both directly and

27 Mukherjee, “The Sepoy Mutinies Revisited,” in *War & Society in Colonial India: 1805-1945*, ed. Kaushik Roy (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006), 117. This essay was first published in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (eds), *India’s Colonial Encounter: Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1993; reprint 2004, pp 193-204).

28 G.W. Forrest, *The Indian Mutiny 1857-58: Selections from the Letters, Despatches, and Other State Papers*, Vol.1 (Lahore: Sang-E-Meel Publications, 2006), 311-312.

29 Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication*,

indirectly exposed to considerable flows of information. Certainly, we know that the sepoy's recognized the immense value of the telegraph from the fact that one of their first moves upon rebelling at Meerut was to sever the telegraph lines.³⁰ Even without the benefit of modern technologies like the telegraph, Indian communications employed against British interests during the conflict were famous for their speed operated "in a manner 'almost electric.'"³¹ As noted by Bayly, the rapid spread of native channels of communication probably played a role in development of the British mania for identifying the passing from village to village of a variety of objects, from chapatis and lotuses to brinjal flowers and coconuts as evidence of the dire conspiracies of holy men.³² While there is no evidence to suggest that Mangal Pandey's name itself was been on the lips of those who participated in the networks of communication that helped precipitate the full-scale rebellion, it seems improbable that events at Berhampore and Barrackpore would have escaped their attention entirely.

If we accept that informal information networks operated fluidly across northern India in 1857, Mukherjee's assertion that events at Barrackpore and Meerut cannot be connected begins to look increasingly untenable. Incendiary fires aimed at destroying British property were widespread during in the early months of 1857, indicating that the mutinies at Barrackpore and Meerut were common expressions of a wave of anti-British feeling that manifested all over northern India and beyond. Fires were reported from the suburbs of Calcutta, Amballa, Agra and Meerut in the west, but even from as far afield as Rangoon, where a catastrophic inferno was estimated to have incinerated up to three quarters of British property at end of April.³³ Perceptively, Major-General J.B. Hearsey, in a communication to his superiors in Calcutta on the 28th of January, drew connections between these fires and the stirring discontent in the ranks, noting that,

the circumstance of a sergeant's bungalow being burnt down at Raneegunge... and also three incendiary fires having occurred at the station within the last four days; one, the electric telegraph bungalow, and since then two bungalows that were unoccupied; the second occurring only last night; as also Ensign F.E.A. Chamier, 34th Regiment Native Infantry, having taken a lighted arrow from the thatch of his own bungalow; - has confirmed in my mind that this incendiarism is caused by ill-affected men...³⁴

British records show ample evidence of an active and widespread conspiracy throughout this period. Hearsey's correspondence to Calcutta of the 28th of January quoted above also makes the earliest reference to sepoy's concerns over the greased cartridges, speculating that such unease had been fomented by religio-political groups such as the "Dhurma Sabha" from Calcutta.³⁵ On the 8th of February, Hearsey again wrote to Calcutta, expressing his concerns that his men were being "tampered with by designing villains when on duty in Fort William and Calcutta," and that "after frequent absences on such detached duty, many of them return to their lines with strange ideas

1780-1870 (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 318.

30 Forrest, 250.

31 Bayly, 315.

32 Bayly, 316 and *Bengal Hurkaru*, April 7, 1857.

33 Bengal Hurkaru and India Gazette, May 5th, 1857.

34 Forrest, 108.

35 Sarup, 4-5.

and unsettled minds.”³⁶ Even more troubling for Hearsey was a statement made to one of his officers by a sepoy of No. 8 Company of (Mangal Pandey’s own) 34th Regiment Native Infantry, one Ramsahai Lalla, to the effect that he had,

become cognizant of a plot amongst the men of the different regiments, four in number, at this station... determined to rise up against their officers and commence by either plundering or burning down the bungalows at Barrackpore... to proceed to Calcutta and attempt to seize Fort William, or failing that, take possession of the Treasury... Also, that the men of other regiments were to be informed of what was being done here, and that they were called upon to co-operate with their comrades, the affair being one that concerned them all equally.³⁷ [Emphasis added.]

Ramsahai’s intelligence was corroborated some days later by another informant, Jemadar Durriow, who claimed to have been coerced to participate in a midnight meeting of some 300 sepoys who invited him to join them in rising up and killing their British officers. Durriow volunteered the names of those he knew, though most of the men were unrecognizable, “their heads tied up with cloths, leaving only a small part of their faces exposed.”³⁸ Two days later again, native doctor, Ramjan Khan came forward and made a statement to his commanding officer that he had “overheard a sepoy of the 2nd Regiment Native (Grenadier) Infantry mention at the hospital to someone that a *kossid* had been sent to the *Ung-ka-pultan* at Berhampore and to the regiments at Dinapore, informing them that ten or twelve of us have raised a disturbance and we want you to support us.”³⁹

Almost two weeks later, on the 25th of February, a guard of 12 sepoys, one havildar and one naick of the 34th N.I. arrived from Barrackpore at Berhampore in the company of a detachment of convalescent European soldiers. These native soldiers of Mangal Pandey’s own regiment were subsequently implicated in an inquiry held into the 19th Regiment’s dramatic all-night stand-off with Colonel Mitchell and his artillery, which began on the evening of the 26th of January and ultimately resulted in the disbandment of the regiment for mutiny. Two weeks before Mangal Pandey’s action, two sepoys from Barrackpore, Boodheelall Tewarry and Boohadoor Sing, were found guilty of mutiny by a Court Martial for their part in conspiring to seize the mint in Calcutta and overthrow the British at Fort William.⁴⁰ Clearly, despite Mukherjee’s averrance on the point, Pandey’s insurrection did not occur in a vacuum but was part of a broader mood of discontent.

There may be no proof positive connecting this discontent in Barrackpore and Calcutta with the outbreak at Meerut. However, the temporal divide between the 29th March and the 10th of May, looks narrower when we consider that Pandey was not executed until the 8th of April, his Jemadar Issuree Pandey until the 18th of April, and that the disbandment of the 34th Regiment did not occur until the 6th of May. Moreover, there seems every reason to think that the disbanded sepoys of the 19th and the 34th regiments, who returned westward in dishonor to their ancestral villages and towns in Bihar and Awadh, would have had little to lose in joining the ranks of

36 Sarup, 17.

37 Sarup, 18.

38 Ibid, 20.

39 Ibid., 40. Christopher Bayly, in *Empire & Information*, glosses *kassid* as “a runner.” *Ung-ka-pultan* simply refers to a Regiment.

40 Forrest, Appendix C, 631.

those who marched on Delhi, Lucknow and other rebel targets. Certainly, there was plenty of speculation by the Calcutta press that, at the very least, the disbanded men represented a threat to private property in lower Bengal.⁴¹

Finally, if yet further evidence is required to establish that Pandey was not merely an “accidental hero,” but was in all likelihood motivated to actively participate in the coming rebellion by something approaching a proto-nationalist sentiment, we need only look back to the closing months of 1856. It is highly probable that many sepoys of the 34th N.I. were themselves sons of the soil of Awadh, since this region, along with that of Bhojpur, comprised the main recruiting grounds for the Bengal Army. The annexation of Awadh in 1856 was characterized as early as 1857 by a stern critic of the Company’s excesses as “dacoity in exclesis,” and has, as noted above, ever since been cited as a key contributing factor in the rebellion of 1857.⁴² Mangal Pandey’s precise origins are obscure and contested, with one proposed lineage placing him in Nagwa village east of Varanasi in the Bhojpur region and another claiming he his birth in Akbarpur tehsil (or district) of Faizabad in Awadh. We do know, however, that his regiment was stationed in Awadh as part of the “Oudh Field Force” which provided the military strength undergirding the diplomatic ultimatum that relieved Shah Wajid Ali of his throne.⁴³ In a move that surely heaped injury upon insult, the 34th Regiment, having served the Company’s purposes at Lucknow, was in November transferred by river vessel downstream from Cawnpore to Barrackpore, thus becoming the first unit of the Company’s forces to be moved under a recent order depriving native infantry of full marching batta, or travel allowance.⁴⁴ Thus, it is clear that Mangal and his comrades arrived in Barrackpore with at least two major grievances that must have weighed heavily on their minds; a divided sense of loyalties compounded by a significant reduction in their remunerations. These grievances were soon to be expressed in the climate of incendiary fires, secret meetings and anti-government plots described above and ultimately in Pandey’s attack on Hewson and Baugh. To insist that these expressions of discontent in the Bengal Army at Barrackpore should be considered unrelated to similar intimations occurring at Meerut, as does Mukherjee, defies common sense.

A Failure to Communicate: Growing Distance between British Officers and Indian Sepoys

The Calcutta press had noticed problems in the Native Army well in advance of 1857. As early as January 1850 a letter to the editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru* decried the state of affairs in the Bengal Army, noting that significant erosion had occurred in the familiarity and camaraderie that had once characterized relations between European officers and Indian subalterns. The writer advocated the establishment of a ‘Regimental Field School for Native Troops,’ arguing that such an institution was necessary in the context of so many newly arrived European officers who were wholly unfamiliar with indigenous languages.⁴⁵ This mourning of the passing of easy relations between officer

⁴¹ See for example reports and editorials regarding concerns over the potentially unruly conduct of the disbanded men in *Bengal Hurkaru*, April 1, 1857, *The Hindoo Patriot*, April 2, 1857, *The Friend of India*, April 2, 1857, and again in *The Hindoo Patriot*, May 21, 1857.

⁴² Samuel Lucas, *Dacoity in Excelsis or The Spoilation of Oudh by the East India Company* (London: J.R. Taylor, 1857).

⁴³ Military Department, 25 July 1856, No. 28

⁴⁴ Ibid. See also, Military Department, 28 February 1856 No. 165.

⁴⁵ *Bengal Hurkuru*, January 10, 1850.

and sepoy will be a familiar refrain to anyone who has read *From Sepoy to Subedar*, the memoir of Sitaram Pandey, who served much of his relatively long life in the Bengal Army between 1812 and 1860.⁴⁶ A translation of part of his account reads,

In those days the sahibs could speak our language much better than they do now, and they mixed more with us. Although officers today have to pass the language examination, and have to read books, they do not understand our language. I have seldom met a sahib who could really read a book or letter although he had been passed by the examining board. The only language they learn is that of the lower orders, which they pick up from their servants, which is unsuitable to be used in polite conversation. The sahibs used to give us *nautches* for the regiment,⁴⁷ and they attended all the men's games. They also took us with them when they went out hunting, or at least all those of us who wanted to go... Well, English soldiers are a different breed nowadays. They are neither as fine nor as tall as they used to be. They can seldom speak one word of our language except to abuse us and if they could learn polite expressions as quickly as they can learn abusive once, they would indeed be apt scholars.⁴⁸

Based on such comments, we might certainly speculate that disaffection between British officers and Indian sepoys was in itself a significant factor leading to the mutiny. At the very least, the existence of deteriorating relations between officers and sepoys resulting, in part, from an impaired ability to communicate with each other, should enliven us to the context in which misunderstandings over the question of the cartridges arose on both sides.

Certainly, it would seem that Bernard Cohn's cognizance of the relationship between "the command of language and the language of command" was not sufficiently shared at all levels of the Bengal Army by the late 1850s.⁴⁹ Another source intimating a sense of the growing distance between newly-arrived British officers and their Indian subalterns are letters written home to members of his family by Robert William Danvers during the years 1854-1858.⁵⁰ Eventually attached to the 70th Regiment of the Native Infantry as an interpreter and accidentally killed by his own men during a

⁴⁶ Sita Ram Pandey, *From Sepoy to Subedar, being the Life and Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, a Native Officer of the Bengal Army written and related by himself*, Ed. James Lunt, trans. Lieutenant-Colonel Norgate, 1873 (Delhi: Vikas, 1970). The authenticity of this text has been questioned by several scholars, including R. Mukherjee who nevertheless uses it extensively to reconstruct a sense of what life was like for sepoys in the service of the East India Company. In my opinion, elements of Sita Ram's writing appear to bear such strong resemblance as to parody certain aspects of colonial rhetoric that it seems very possible that the work as a whole was concocted as an elaborate hoax by some British officer with too much time on his hands. On the other hand, it also seems likely that over the course of 48 years of service, Sita Ram must have imbibed his share of British rhetoric and that we might expect this to color his memoirs.

⁴⁷ Hobson Jobson gives us the definition, "a kind of ballet-dance performed by women; also any kind of stage performance." Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, Ed. William Crooke, *Hobson Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2007), 620. (Originally published 1886).

⁴⁸ Sita Ram Pandey, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, 24-25.

⁴⁹ Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 16.

⁵⁰ Robert W. Danvers, *Letters from India and China, During the Years 1854-1858* (London & Aylesbury: Hazell, Watson, and Viney: 1898).

drill towards the end of the uprising, Danvers' earlier letters represent him as anxiously, and not terribly successfully, seeking advancement in the ranks of the Company Army upon his arrival in India, all the while eying the people and culture of his newfound surrounds with reproachful disdain. In a typical note he relates to his sister a popular story explaining how Delhi came to be so afflicted with flies, as a result of the curse of a Hindu prince. "The stupid natives declare that ever since that time the plague of flies *has* been the curse of the place!"⁵¹ Later, in 1855, he presciently gripes to his brother that, "The Jacks [sepoy]s grumble, as they always do, about their huts... There is no trust to be placed in the natives, who, as soon as they saw us denuded, would probably turn upon us, revolt, and the consequences might be serious."⁵² Tellingly, in a letter in which he informs his sister on having passed the language exam required to train as an interpreter, he seems altogether less motivated by a genuine interest in Hindustani than he does by the increase in his salary: "I saw myself in general orders the other day as having passed in Hindustani. I can now get my 180 rupees Munshi allowance as soon as I choose to apply for it; this will not come amiss after that loss of mine."⁵³

The records of Mangal Pandey's court martial trial also imply that imperfect communication was a feature of workplace relations at Barrackpore. Sergeant-Major James Thornton Hewson, one of the officers who engaged in the melee with Mangal Pandey late in the afternoon of Sunday the 29th of March, gave, in his testimony at the court-martial trial, an ambiguous sense of his own facility with Hindustani. On the one hand, when asked by the prosecutor if Pandey had said anything in the presence of the guard, Hewson was able to affirm, "Yes. '*Nikul ao, pultan; nikul ao hamara sath,*' Come out, men; come out and join me – you sent me out here, why don't you come and join me?" It is interesting that the English gloss given by Hewson contains more information than is given in the Hindustani quote, the phrase "you sent me out here" being absent in the Hindustani. Here, it is clear that Hewson is attempting to implicate other members of the guard, not presently under trial, as having participated in a conspiracy. Other comments in Hewson's testimony indicate that he was not altogether comfortably fluent in the language of his charges. Frustrated with the Jemadar Issuree Pandey for failing to follow his orders and arrest the riotous Mangal, Hewson notes that several sepoy did attempt to communicate with the latter, but that he was unable to understand exactly what was said. "Jemadar Gunness Lalla spoke to Mungul Pandy, the prisoner now before me. I could not understand all he said, nor repeat it in Hindustani. What I heard Gunness Lalla, the Jemadar, say was to give up his arms."⁵⁴ While it is quite possible that Hewson's ability to hear what was said was merely impaired by the general commotion, it also appears that he was less than fluent in the native tongue of his subalterns.

"... a sepoy has heavily drugged himself and run a muck...": 1850s Attitudes Concerning Orientalism, Intoxication & Irrationality

The question of Mangal Pandey's state of intoxication at the time of his insurrection is important both because of what it tells us about British presuppositions at the moment of his rebellion and because such presuppositions have ever after

51 Ibid., 20.

52 Ibid., 21.

53 Ibid., 19.

54 A *Jemadar* was a low-ranking junior officer in the native army.

informed historical interpretations of his agency or lack thereof.⁵⁵ Whereas Mukherjee contends that all we know for sure about Pandey's motivations was that he acted under the influence of intoxicating substances, it seems reasonable to infer that Pandey's self-representation at his court-martial trial was framed in response to British understandings of what it meant for a native soldier to be intoxicated (and violently attack his superior officers). The earliest report of Pandey's insurrection in the *Bengal Hurkaru*, dated the 31st of March, noted that "a sepoy has drugged himself extensively and run amuck, shooting at Lieutenant and Adjutant Baugh..."⁵⁶ In the pregnant pause before the full onslaught of the rebellion, the British chose to interpret Pandey's actions as those of an isolated and probably insane individual. To be sure, it is impossible to know precisely how Pandey would have self-reflexively understood the British and their perceptions regarding an intoxicated and enraged sepoy, but to ignore altogether the implications of this question amounts to historical negligence.

It would be problematic to assume that highly politicized 21st-century attitudes to drug use and abuse can be automatically applied to interpretations of mid-19th-century British and Indian cultural mores. Rather than assuming that references to intoxication at Pandey's trial carry the same weight of approbation as they might in today's society, we need to recognize that in the 1850s, drugs of various sorts carried a no-less complex, yet substantially different register of meaning. An emerging body of scholarship is beginning to indicate that currently active taboos on the use of psychoactive and narcotic drugs gained strength by the early twentieth century, but held little influence earlier in the nineteenth century.⁵⁷ Opium and its derivatives, as the most effective pain relievers then available, were socially acceptable in the earlier 19th century. As Paul Winther notes, "an important factor for the indifference [to anti-opium-trade polemics] was massive opium consumption in the British Isles. There was no stigma associated with the habit so there was no problem linked to consumption elsewhere in the world."⁵⁸ Use of cannabis as a drug, by contrast, it would appear was but little known in Europe in the middle decades of the 19th century, and came to be included along with alcohol and opium as a target of temperance campaigners later in the century, almost incidentally.⁵⁹

A report on rare medical trials of cannabis-extract appearing in the *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal*, published in London in 1840, takes considerable pains in attempting to clarify existing confusion over the taxonomy of the drug in question, responding to the apparent common misperception that opium and cannabis were one and the same.⁶⁰ The trial's findings were apparently favorable; the extract of cannabis proving to be useful in treating a range of complaints. The point here, however, beyond

⁵⁵ Rochona Majumdar makes the excellent point that scholars often "seem to overlook the point that an intoxicant may, under certain circumstances, very well work to facilitate 'agency' for human beings," in Rochona Majumdar and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Mangal Pandey: Film and History," *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 12, 2007, 1778.

⁵⁶ *Bengal Hurkaru*, Tuesday, March 31st, 1857, Calcutta: Bengal Hurkaru Press, by S. Smith Co.

⁵⁷ See Mills, *Cannabis Britannica: Empire, Trade, and Prohibition, 1800-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁸ Paul C. Winther, *Anglo-European Science and the Rhetoric of Empire: Malaria, opium, and British Rule in India, 1756-1895* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 6.

⁵⁹ James H. Mills, "Colonialism, Cannabis and the Christians: Mission Medical Knowledge and the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission of 1893-4" in *Healing Bodies, Saving Souls: Medical Missions in Asia and Africa*, ed. David Hardiman (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2006), 178.

⁶⁰ W. Ley, "On the Efficacy of Indian Hemp on Some Convulsive Disorders", *Provincial Medical and Surgical Journal*, 4 (1842), 407-9. London.

establishing that not all European views held exotic drugs in contempt, is simply that the British at home were at this time mostly ignorant of cannabis drugs.

In India, where they were apparently widely consumed in a multiplicity of forms and in widely divergent contexts according to region and social status, cannabis drugs primarily concerned the British as a lucrative source of revenue. As William Reinhardt put it in the late 1970s, “Marijuana, *Cannabis sativa*, or ganja as it is called in Bengali and Hindi, was as legal in British India as tobacco is in the United States today.”⁶¹ Between 1793 and the 1850s, excise on hemp drugs was exacted from retailers, with few, if any, direct restrictions placed on the agricultural and post-agricultural phases of production. After 1854, the onus of taxation was shifted to the wholesaler, with increasing surveillance placed on upon growers in order to determine the amount of raw cannabis present in the system.⁶² By the 1870s, the colonial state began to institute new legislative measures in order to attempt to control production, regulate prices and maximize revenue, a process which saw it engage in a cat and mouse game with recalcitrant growers and opportunistic smugglers determined to eke out better profits via a black market trade in hemp drugs. As James H. Mills convincingly argues, the roots of the now widely held association of cannabis drugs with disreputability and criminality can be traced in large part to its increasing association with smuggling and the black market trade of the middle and latter decades of the 19th century.

The most extensive and systematic effort on the part of the Indian Government to measure and describe the extent of cannabis use on an All-India basis was the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission of 1893-94. This body was established as a result of an unlikely combination of pressures on the part of temperance activists who sought to absolve the British Empire of its complicity in the pernicious effects of drug addiction of all sorts, and sections of the establishment who were willing to sacrifice the lucrative revenues derived from cannabis consumption on the subcontinent, in the hope that this concession might preserve, for a time at least, their interests in the ever-so-much-more lucrative opium export trade.⁶³ Indeed, it appears that the commission was genuinely open-ended. Officers were directed to determine the extent and nature of usage of the various types of hemp drugs including ganja, bhang, majum and charas, and to propose on the one hand the best ways of reforming the taxation system, and on the other to gauge the likely effects in terms in social unrest and economic disruption in the event of prohibition. What emerges most strongly from the published findings of the commission is how widely divergent social customs pertaining to the consumption of cannabis drugs in South Asia were, and, even more pertinently for us, how kaleidoscopically varied British perceptions and opinions were on the relative merits and demerits of the same.

Of particular interest here is a supplementary volume detailing certain “answers received to selected questions for the native army.”⁶⁴ Although the value of this document for the historian in determining precise differences across regional attitudes is limited by the fact that answers were submitted anonymously, no doubt in order to elicit

⁶¹ William W. Reinhardt, “Marijuana in British India: British Policy toward Hemp Drugs”, *Language and Society in Modern India*, eds. Robert I. Crane and Bradford Spangenberg (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1981), 119.

⁶² Mills, *Cannabis Britannica*, 59.

⁶³ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁴ India, Department of Finance and Commerce, *Indian Hemp Drugs Commission, Supplementary Volume, Answers Received to Selected Questions for the Native Army*, Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1895 (New York: Johnson Reprint Company, 1971).

more frank responses from the white officers charged with answering the questionnaire, what emerges most clearly, once again, is that no monolithic attitude towards hemp drugs existed in the army during the 1890s.⁶⁵ Indeed, a great deal of confusion appears to have existed on the part of British military officers as to the role of cannabis in the social and religious lives of their men and the peoples amongst whom they served. Whereas many respondents emphatically stated that there was no known connection between hemp drugs and religious rituals or festivals, others embarked on extensive ethnographic description of its association with festivals such as Holi, Diwali and the Shivratri, even providing recipes for bhang preparations enjoyed on specific occasions.⁶⁶ In some areas, among them probably the Bombay Presidency and the North West Frontier Provinces, all use of hemp drugs was explicitly proscribed, "All regiments have a standing order against the use of these drugs, and punish for it,"⁶⁷ and "Men know they will be punished if caught smoking it, and it is not so easily procured, on account of regimental police patrols,"⁶⁸ to take two examples. In other areas, responsible use was tolerated and even recognized as beneficial: "The moderate use of any of these drugs is not looked down upon. There is no opinion in the native army in regard to the practice of the consumption of any of them, though any interference on the part of the Government in the use of them will, it is said, cause great dissatisfaction among all classes, as the use of them generally is considered beneficial and necessary."⁶⁹

While any generalizations based on the evidence presented in this volume must be necessarily circumspect, there is an overall tendency on the part of respondents to imply that hemp drugs as a whole had recently undergone a decline in respectability. Smoking of ganja and charas were increasingly deemed to be the disreputable practices of lower classes and castes, whereas eating and drinking bhang, which was practiced by elite Hindus, maintained a degree of grudging tolerance from some quarters of the British establishment. It would indeed be speculative to posit causes for this decline in respectability, but a contributing factor is probably reflected in the general trend, especially in the Bengal Army, away from privileging upper-caste Hindus, who were widely perceived to have been behind the uprising of 1857. One telling response, which tended towards disapproval of cannabis drugs, notes that usage was "...on the decrease in this regiment, as the Mers⁷⁰ are not consumers of drug unless taught by outsiders. The drug was introduced by sepoys who were recruited in Oudh."⁷¹ Although this report was separated from Mangal Pandey's time by a gulf of over thirty-five years (in which British imperialism underwent enormous intellectual and structural reconfigurations),⁷² it is noteworthy that Awadhi recruits maintained a persistent reputation as cannabis

⁶⁵ Some context can be gleaned from references made to locality and the ethnic and religious composition of the regiment in question. The questionnaire begins with the following solicitation for demographic information, "20. Give the total strength of your regiment, and the numbers of each caste or class of which it is composed, showing separately – (a) combatants, (b) non-combatants, (c) authorized camp followers. What numbers in each caste or class smoke ganja and charas respectively? 24. What numbers in each caste or class respectively (a) eat or (b) drink bhang."

⁶⁶ Ibid., For examples see answers 81 and 32, on pp. 57 and 22, respectively.

⁶⁷ Ibid., answer 117, p. 33. See also answer 91, p. 63.

⁶⁸ Ibid., answer 60, p. 43.

⁶⁹ Ibid, answer 80, p. 56.

⁷⁰ The Mer are a people of Kshatryia origins from the Kathiawar region of Saurashtra in western India.

⁷¹ Ibid, Answer 54, p 39.

⁷² Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity, in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester and NY: Manchester University Press, 2006).

users. Can we take this to infer that there was nothing particularly unusual about Pandey's drug use in March, 1857? More research dealing specifically with prevailing attitudes of the 1850s is clearly necessary.

On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that negative British conceptions of cannabis drugs, as they existed throughout the 19th century, were largely shaped by the persistent popularity of a much earlier, "parochially English," traveler's guide composed by one John Henry Grose. First published in 1757 but reprinted in part or whole in numerous publications intended for use by merchants and colonial officers working in India for well over a century, Mills suggests that Grose catered to his "audience's predilection for titillating tales of oriental excess and for reassuring passages on 'the mildness and tolerance of the English government'..."⁷³ Mills observes that Henry Draper Steel's 1779 work, the *Portable Instructions for Purchasing the Drugs and Spices of Asia and the East Indies* "gave a rare description of the preparation of cannabis, 'Bangue':

A species of opiate in much repute throughout the East for drowning care. It is the leaf of a kind of wild hemp little differing as to leaf and seed (except in size) from our Hemp. The effects of the drug are to confound the understanding, set the imagination loose and induce a kind of folly or forgetfulness. Mr. Grose speaks of it in the following manner: 'Bangue is an intoxicating herb; in the use of which it is hard to say what pleasure can be found, it being very disagreeable to the taste and violent in its operation which produces a temporary madness, that in some, when designedly taken for that purpose, ends in running, what they call a muck, furiously killing every one they meet without distinction till they themselves are knocked on the head like mad dogs. But this practice is much rarer in India than it was formerly.'⁷⁴

This bizarre reference to the practice of "running amok" as having once existed more commonly in India in the somewhat distance past, (its decline was presumably due to the edifying influences of colonial rule), suggests a conflation of India with the Indies further to the east, since the term "amok" is generally considered to have entered English from the Malay language.⁷⁵ Winzeler, writing of 19th-century and early 20th-century perceptions, explains that "amok", which apparently peaked as a phenomenon in Malaya in the early 19th century, "...was believed to be a long-established pattern. It was assumed that the pattern could be explained by certain traditional features of Malay (or Malayan) society and culture, having deep roots in the Malayan character. It was also thought that with modernization, amok would die out..."⁷⁶ Regardless, Grose's account certainly indicates the existence of a deep-seated precedent in British perceptions of cannabis use being closely associated with random acts of primitive violence in "the East." It seems likely those sepoys and their British officers who served in Burma and the Straits Settlements during the years immediately prior to 1857, may have carried tales with them back to colonial India, whether first hand or not, of natives

73 James H. Mills, *Cannabis Britannica*, 24.

74 Ibid., 21.

75 Robert L. Winzeler, "Malayan Amok and Latah as 'History Bound' Syndromes" in *The Underside of Malaysian History: Pullers, Prostitutes, Plantation Workers*, ed. Peter J. Rimmer & Lisa M. Allen (Singapore: Singapore University Press for the Malaysia Society of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1990), 214.

76 Ibid., 217.

“running amok”. Clearly, the notion that Pandey’s rebellion bore the hallmarks of this primitive customary behavior had currency in Bengal in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

Here again, the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission provides some suggestive insights into the question, even if its anterior nature makes it a somewhat less than ideal source for understanding the 1850s. For examples see questions 53, “Does any excessive indulgence in any of these drugs incite to unpremeditated crime, violent or otherwise? Do you know of any case in which it has led to temporary homicidal frenzy?”, and 54, “Are these drugs used by persons to fortify themselves to commit a premeditated act of violence or other crime?” These questions posed to the Native Army elicited the usual range of contradictory responses, with the majority of respondents disclaiming knowledge of any such effects or uses and not a few denying that hemp drugs were associated with such behavior. Several positive responses were, however, framed in language that evokes the discourse of “amok” in strikingly similar tones as appeared in the context of the Mangal Pandey incident. For example::

Answer 162. The excessive use of these drugs does in my opinion incite to unpremeditated crime. Nearly twenty years ago I knew a man in the regiment to be incited by the use of ganja to a temporary homicidal frenzy.

Answer 200. Have read and heard of instances where sepoys have run amuck or revenged an imaginary grievance after premeditation and the use of bhang.

Answer 209. (54) Yes; it is well known that bhang is thus taken when a man is desirous of running “amuck.” A case occurred in this regiment before or about 1870 on parade when a man attacked his European officers and was at once cut down by the other men.

Answer 117. Only one case on record: a sepoy of the regiment ran amuck in 1887 at Yamethinin Upper Burma: he was a known ganja-smoker, though never caught in the act. Ganja, I believe, was found in a parcel sent to him from India, and after he was shot-down a large quantity of majum was found in his kit-bag. This was the only instance I know, and fairly proves that excessive indulgence in hemp incited unpremeditated crime.

Answer 46. I have no experience. A man who runs “amuck” is often spoken of as “bhanged.”

Answer 191. No actual case has come within my knowledge: but I know that all the fanatics in Afghanistan were all primed with charas before “running amuck.” It is well known that “Ghazis” are well intoxicated by charas before they “run amuck.”

Answer 15. Yes, in the same way that a man might take a dram to fortify himself for the same purpose.

Answer 43. Excessive indulgence does lead to crime. Lately a case occurred in the 36th Sikhs: a man known by the name of “Bhangor” – from being addicted to bhang – shot his friend and shot at anyone who approached, and eventually shot himself.

Answer 44. Probably leads to crime, such as causing a man to run “amuck.” Have seen no such case myself.

Despite the substantial period of time that had elapsed between Mangal Pandey’s death and the 1894 Commission, these responses may provide analogous glimpses into British perceptions of the Mangal Pandey incident of 1857.

Trial by Court Martial

What we do not have, regrettably, is direct insight into the mindset of Mangal Pandey, based on historical sources (unless we are willing to accede to the veracity of the *Aalha Mangal Pandey* as presented by Misra). Pandey’s participation in his court-martial trial was very nearly mute. As Mukherjee says, “the records yield nothing as the principal actor refused to speak. The proceedings of the court had offered Mangal Pandey an opportunity to speak to history. He had turned down that opportunity.”⁷⁷ Whereas Mukherjee has chosen to interpret Pandey’s silence as the result of his being “helpless” and “cowed down by fear” in the context of the trial room,⁷⁸ it is at least as plausible that his silence was calculated, and that his few words may well have been crafted in response to British preconceptions of drug abuse and the phenomenon of “amok.”

Part of Mukherjee’s perspective stems from his contention that the sepoy was by definition out of place in the British military courtroom. “In a trial a sepoy was always in a helpless situation. The Mutiny Act was read out to him in Persian and Arabic rather than in the vernacular language of the sepoy.”⁷⁹ Mukherjee is surely right to follow the Memoirs of Sitaram Pandey, and also Peers⁸⁰ in suggesting that “language problems plagued military tribunals and sepoys were often denied the services of accurate and unbiased translations,”⁸¹ yet it should be remembered that the court, apart from the judge and the prosecutor, was comprised of sepoys who had attained the rank of Subedar. Ultimately, how we understand Pandey’s demeanor in the courtroom depends more on our own disposition than any guiding evidence. It is just as likely that his silence was the result of an honor-bound compulsion not to implicate his fellows, made all the more pressing by the presence of his peers, as it is that he was struck dumb by fear.

Although he had very little to say for himself, it is highly suggestive that Pandey’s scanty testimony adds up to a self-representation remarkably consistent with European descriptions of typical cases of “amok.” Consider the following definition as laid out by Gimlette in 1901,

77 Mukherjee, *Mangal Pandey*, 49.

78 Ibid., 50.

79 Ibid.

80 Sitaram Pandey, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, 74 & 177, and Douglas M. Peers, “Sepoys, Soldiers and the Lash: Race, Caste and Army Discipline in India, 1820-50,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 23, no. 2 (1995): 211-247.

81 Ibid.

(1) A sudden paroxysmal homicide in the male, with evident loss of self-control; (2) a prodromal period of mental depression; (3) a fixed idea to persist in reckless homicide without any motive; and (4) a subsequent loss of memory for the acts committed at the time.⁸²

When asked, “Did you act on Sunday last by your own free will, or were you instructed by others?” Pandey insisted, “Of my own free will. I expected to die.” Did he load his own musket to save his own life? “No, I intended to take it.” Did he intend to take the adjutant’s life, or would he have shot anyone else? “I should have shot anyone who came.” Was he under the influence of any drugs? “Yes, I have been taking *bhang* and opium of late, but formerly never touched any drugs. I was not aware of what I was doing.”

In Pandey’s brief testimony then, we have very nearly all the hallmarks of Gimlette’s definition of a native “run amok.” He evinced a “loss of self control.” He had lately been consuming drugs in the lead up to his actions, something out of his character but consonant with “a prodromal period of mental depression.” He certainly betrayed a “fixed idea to persist in reckless homicide,” disclaiming any motive besides a propensity to shoot “anyone who came.” We are left with the option of accepting Mangal Pandey as the “miserable fanatic” of 19th-century British discourse, or inferring there was more to his self-representation at the Court-Martial than colonialist historiography has been willing to admit.

Conclusions

The contested status of Mangal Pandey as a national hero reflects the imbrication of processes of decolonization with ongoing contestation over competing visions of the modern Indian nation. One aspect of this is illustrated by the nature of the controversy that surrounded the 2005 Bollywood dramatization, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*.⁸³ Objecting to the film’s “distortion of historical facts and no reference to his native village, Nagwa,” a movement comprised of “local intellectuals, theatre personalities and students” demonstrated for three days outside local theaters and ultimately prevented its screening in Ballia.⁸⁴ Protestors apparently objected to Mangal Pandey’s depiction as a womanizer who associated with “nautch girls” and the implication that he was a disreputable drug abuser. Protests in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh were successful in preventing the public screening of the film.⁸⁵ While the objections raised to the film may appear trivial, even absurd, it is instructive that anything deemed to tarnish the sacred reputation of a national martyr so readily gains traction in the current political climate.

At the same time, the film attracted criticism from a range of scholars for its elastic handling of historical facts, despite the disclaimer that “scenes depicted

82 Robert L. Winzeler, “Malayan *Amok* and *Latah* as ‘History Bound’ Syndromes,” 217.

83 *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, DVD, Directed by Ketan Mehta (Mumbai: Yash Raj Films, 2005). See: Press Trust of India, “BJP demands ban on Mangal Pandey,” Expressindia.com, Thursday, August 11, 2005.

84 Press Trust of India, “UP govt to consider ban on *Mangal Pandey*”, Expressindia.com, Sunday, August 14, 2005. See also: “Mob Stops ‘Mangal Pandey’ Screening in Hometown,” Indiaglitz.com Saturday, August 13, 2005.

85 Rediff.com, “UP govt to consider ban on Mangal Pandey,” August 14, 2005.

may be a hybrid of fact and fiction.”⁸⁶ *The Rising* does go well beyond the types of speculations – those grounded in evidence – indulged in by this paper. For example, in depicting Mangal Pandey’s participation in midnight meetings, it shows him not merely as a common sepoy, but as their representative among the emissaries of Nana Sahib and Bahadur Shah themselves. It would seem that such fanciful details are not entirely the fabrication of Ketan Mehta, however, but reflect salient popular traditions.⁸⁷ The film also, for instance, elaborates emotively upon a popular folk tradition, apparently without basis in empirical fact, that Pandey was hung from a banyan tree, and not, as the British state papers record, and contemporary news reports corroborate, from a gallows erected for the purpose on the parade ground. It is tempting to speculate that this mode of telling history, privileging, as it does, heroic themes and moral lessons over verifiable facts and accurate chronologies, expresses a puranic sensibility that has long been central to South Asian ways of relating to the past.⁸⁸

Another, more troubling feature of the recent revival of interest in Mangal Pandey is the tendency to play up the extent of the violence he perpetrated,⁸⁹ along with the inclination to search eagerly in his history for martial origins of the Indian, and in particular Hindu, national character. Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and others have traced the genealogy of this stratagem back to the late 19th-century historiography of Bankimchandra, seeing in his efforts to remasculinize a colonized Hindu manhood the germ of militant Hindu nationalism.⁹⁰ Rudrangshu Mukherjee is nobly attempting to write against this tradition by insisting on proper standards of empiricism.

Nonetheless, this paper has demonstrated the existence of abundant evidence confirming anyone wishing to eulogize Mangal Pandey as a “brave martyr.” Communalism and elitist nationalism can only be combated by arguments directly confronting them on the basis of their own demerits. Despite the potential for Mangal Pandey’s heroism to be abducted and misused by those who would seek to claim his memory in the name of communalist rhetoric, or even in the service of a monolithic, centralized state, we do him, and more importantly, ourselves a disservice by disavowing his status as the sepoy who fired the first bullets of 1857.

86 See Rochona Majumdar and Dipseh Chakrabarty, “Mangal Pandey: Film and History,” 1774-75.

87 During recent fieldwork in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh, a local person who had never seen the film, *Mangal Pandey: the Rising*, gave the author an oral account of his understanding of the history of Mangal Pandey and 1857. In the version he narrated, Mangal Pandey was said to have met with Nana Sahib himself to plan the revolt, before personally leading other sepoys in the march on Delhi.

88 Similar ideas are explored in Romilla Thapar, “Society and Historical Consciousness: The Itihasa-purana Tradition,” *History and Beyond* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2000), and Vinay Lal, *The History of History: Politics and Scholarship in Modern India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2003).

89 The plaque accompanying the commemorative statue at Ballia, erected for the sesquicentennial of 1857, states that Mangal Pandey killed 3 British officers. According to official sources, he severely wounded two men, both of whom recovered and testified against him at his Court Martial trial. I am indebted to Rajesh Pandey of Varanasi for the initial translation of this plaque, and Sai Bhatawadekar of the University of Hawaii at Manoa, for her interpretation of the idiomatic expression, “मौत के घाट उतार डाला.”

90 See Ranajit Guha, *An Indian Historiography: A Nineteenth Century Agenda and its Implications* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1988), and Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).