



Delhi and Haryana in the revolt of 1857: A comparative study of political authority and rebel administration

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Abstract

The Revolt of 1857 produced different forms of political authority in Delhi and the region that corresponds broadly to present-day Haryana. Delhi functioned as the symbolic and political centre of the rebellion because the insurgent soldiers restored the Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah II, commonly known as Bahadur Shah Zafar, as the nominal sovereign of Hindustan. The city also became the site of attempts to coordinate military command, fiscal extraction, policing, provisioning, and judicial authority. The surrounding countryside, however, did not develop a single centralized rebel administration. In the Haryana region, resistance was organized through a combination of princely elites, local zamindars, village communities, clan networks, and military retainers. Leaders such as Rao Tula Ram of Rewari, Raja Nahar Singh of Ballabhgarh, and the Nawab of Jhajjar operated within distinct political and social environments and maintained varying relationships with the Mughal centre in Delhi. This paper compares the political legitimacy, administrative practices, fiscal systems, military organization, and logistical functions of Delhi and Haryana during the Revolt of 1857. It argues that the two regions were connected but institutionally different: Delhi attempted to reconstruct imperial sovereignty, whereas Haryana represented a fragmented but active field of regional and local mobilization. The revolt's failure resulted not simply from military inferiority but also from the difficulty of converting these different forms of authority into a coordinated political and military system.

Keywords: Revolt of 1857, Delhi, Haryana, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Rao Tula Ram, rebel administration, Mughal sovereignty, colonial rule

Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 ^[1] was one of the most significant political and military challenges to British rule in nineteenth-century India. It began as a mutiny among soldiers of the Bengal Army but quickly developed into a wider rebellion involving rulers, landed elites, soldiers, artisans, peasants, and urban groups. The uprising extended across large parts of northern and central India, although its intensity, organization, and political objectives varied from region to region.

Delhi occupied a special position in the revolt. Its importance was not only geographical but also political and symbolic. When mutinous soldiers from Meerut entered Delhi on 11 May 1857 ^[3], they sought the authority of the Mughal emperor. Bahadur Shah Zafar had little effective power before the revolt, but his recognition as emperor gave the uprising a language of sovereignty that could unite otherwise diverse groups. Delhi thereby became the principal political centre of the rebellion.

The countryside surrounding Delhi, including the territories that now form much of Haryana, played a different but essential role. The region supplied soldiers, horses, grain, revenue, and communication routes. It also generated its own centres of resistance. Rewari, Ballabhgarh, Jhajjar, Gurgaon, Rohtak, and parts of the Mewat region became sites of armed mobilization and challenges to Company authority.

Yet the political structures of Haryana were not organized under one unified administration. They reflected the region's complex mixture of princely states, zamindari

interests, village communities, caste and clan networks, and military groups.

This paper compares Delhi and Haryana through the following questions

1. How was political authority legitimized in Delhi and Haryana?
2. What administrative institutions did rebel leaders attempt to establish?
3. How were revenue, supplies, and military manpower mobilized?
4. Why did cooperation between Delhi and the surrounding countryside fail to produce a durable rebel state?

The central argument is that Delhi and Haryana constituted complementary but distinct political spaces. Delhi represented an attempt to revive imperial sovereignty through a central court and military command. Haryana represented a more decentralized structure in which local rulers and communities exercised authority through forts, estates, village institutions, and personal networks. This difference gave the revolt considerable regional strength but limited its ability to coordinate political and military action.

Literature Review

Historians have interpreted the Revolt of 1857 ^[1] in different ways. Early British writers described it mainly as a "Sepoy Mutiny," emphasizing the military rebellion and the cartridge controversy. Later Indian nationalist historians viewed it as the First War of Independence and highlighted the cooperation of soldiers, rulers, peasants, and urban groups against British rule. More recent historians have

adopted a regional and social approach, showing that the revolt was not limited to the army.

Delhi occupies a central place in the scholarship because it became the symbolic headquarters of the rebellion after Bahadur Shah Zafar was recognized as emperor by the rebel soldiers from Meerut. Dalrymple (2006) emphasizes the political and cultural importance of the Mughal court and the destruction of Delhi after its recapture by the British. Spear (1951) connects the revolt with the longer decline of Mughal authority and the expansion of British power.

Studies of Haryana demonstrate that the region played an important military and logistical role in supporting Delhi. Yadav (1977) and Yadav (1980) discuss the leadership of Rao Tula Ram of Rewari, Raja Nahar Singh of Ballabhgarh, and other local rulers. Their work shows that resistance in Haryana involved both princely leadership and rural participation. Stokes (1986) further argues that peasants attacked revenue offices, police stations, courts, and official records, indicating opposition to the wider colonial administrative system.

Overall, the literature suggests that the Revolt of 1857 ^[11] in Delhi and Haryana was a complex movement involving military grievances, political resistance, rural unrest, and opposition to colonial rule. However, further research is needed on the experiences of ordinary villagers, women, artisans, and communities whose contributions have received less attention.

Historical and Geographical Context

a. Delhi as an Imperial Symbol

By 1857, Delhi was no longer the administrative capital of a powerful Mughal empire. The Mughal emperor exercised limited authority under the supervision of the East India Company. Nevertheless, the city retained immense symbolic importance. The Red Fort, the imperial court, and the memory of Mughal sovereignty continued to provide a political vocabulary that was recognized across much of North India.

The arrival of the Meerut rebels transformed Delhi from a declining imperial city into the headquarters of the rebellion. The decision of the soldiers to seek the emperor's endorsement was politically significant. It indicated that the revolt was not merely a military protest against greased cartridges, pay, or service conditions. It also involved an effort to challenge the legitimacy of Company rule and to restore an older form of sovereignty.

b. The Haryana Region under Company Rule

The term "Haryana" requires historical qualification. In 1857 ^[12], Haryana did not exist as a separate modern state. The territories now associated with Haryana were divided among the Delhi Division of the North-Western Provinces, the Punjab administrative system, and several princely or semi-autonomous estates. The region included areas such as Gurgaon, Rohtak, Hisar, Rewari, Jhajjar, Ballabhgarh, and parts of Mewat.

Company rule had altered local political and economic relations. Revenue settlements, judicial institutions, police administration, and the expansion of colonial bureaucracy weakened or displaced older forms of authority. At the same time, many local elites retained influence through landholding, lineage, military service, and connections with princely courts. These circumstances enabled the rebellion to take different forms in different localities.

Haryana's proximity to Delhi made the region strategically important. Roads connecting Delhi with Rewari, Alwar, Mathura, Agra, and the Punjab passed through or near the area. Control of these routes affected the movement of troops, supplies, and intelligence. Consequently, the political history of Haryana during the revolt cannot be separated from the siege and defence of Delhi.

Sources and Methodology

This study uses a comparative historical method. It examines Delhi and Haryana as connected political spaces rather than as isolated theatres of conflict. The analysis is based on published historical studies, memoirs, colonial records, and scholarship on the military, social, and political history of the revolt.

The paper distinguishes between three types of authority

1. **Symbolic authority:** referring to claims of sovereignty and legitimacy;
2. **Administrative authority:** referring to taxation, policing, justice, and provisioning;
3. **Coercive authority:** referring to military command, recruitment, and control over territory.

This distinction is important because a rebel leader could possess symbolic legitimacy without having effective administrative control. Similarly, a local ruler could control territory and troops without accepting a fully centralized political programme.

Political Authority in Delhi

a. Bahadur Shah Zafar and the Restoration of Mughal Sovereignty

The proclamation of Bahadur Shah Zafar as emperor was the central political act of the Delhi rebellion. The emperor did not possess the material resources of the earlier Mughal state, but his name had political value. Imperial orders, seals, and proclamations could be used to claim continuity with a recognized political order.

The Mughal court also provided a meeting point for different groups: mutinous soldiers, princes, urban notables, religious scholars, merchants, and officials. The emperor's authority therefore operated at two levels. At the symbolic level, he represented the restoration of legitimate sovereignty. At the practical level, he attempted to mediate among competing military and civilian interests.

However, the emperor's authority was limited. The rebel soldiers who entered Delhi were armed, politically assertive, and often organized according to their regimental identities. They did not simply become servants of the court. Tensions developed between the imperial princes, military leaders, and the soldiers' representatives. The authority of the court depended on negotiation rather than on a stable bureaucratic hierarchy.

b. Military Leadership and the Search for Coordination

The arrival of Bakht Khan from Bareilly in July 1857 ^[3] strengthened the military organization of the Delhi rebels. Bakht Khan had experience in the Bengal Army and sought to impose greater discipline on the forces defending the city. His position illustrates the difficulty of creating a unified command structure. The Delhi garrison included mutinous regiments from different locations, irregular forces, local

volunteers, and armed retainers associated with the imperial court.

The rebel leadership attempted to coordinate military and civil responsibilities through councils and administrative bodies associated with the imperial court. These institutions dealt with matters such as military supply, public order, taxation, and communications. Their authority, however, was contested by princes, officers, soldiers, and influential civilians.

It is therefore more accurate to describe rebel administration in Delhi as an improvised coalition than as a fully centralized government. The city contained elements of a military council, a royal court, an urban police administration, and emergency fiscal management. These elements did not always operate according to one coherent chain of command.

c. Urban Administration

The Delhi rebels faced urgent administrative problems. They had to maintain public order, control the movement of people, regulate markets, protect stores of grain and ammunition, and finance the defence of the city. The imperial administration attempted to use existing offices, including the kotwali and revenue establishments, while adapting them to wartime conditions.

Urban administration depended heavily on cooperation from merchants, moneylenders, artisans, and neighbourhood leaders. The rebel authorities sought contributions and forced loans from wealthy residents. Such measures provided immediate resources but also generated resentment. Merchants were expected to supply grain, money, cloth, animals, and other materials, often without reliable compensation.

The problem was not merely a shortage of money. The rebels also lacked a stable system for converting revenue claims into regular cash payments. The Company's control of important roads and communication channels disrupted the flow of revenue from the countryside. As a result, the Delhi administration struggled to pay soldiers and maintain supplies.

Political Authority in Haryana

a. A Decentralized Political Landscape

Unlike Delhi, Haryana did not possess one universally recognized rebel government. Authority was distributed among princely rulers, landed elites, village headmen, military leaders, and local communities. The revolt therefore varied considerably from one district and estate to another.

The most prominent regional leaders included

- Rao Tula Ram of Rewari;
- Raja Nahar Singh of Ballabhgarh;
- the Nawab of Jhajjar;
- local chiefs and landholders in Gurgaon, Rohtak, Hisar, and Mewat;
- village and clan-based groups that challenged Company officials and institutions.

These actors shared opposition to British authority, but they did not necessarily share identical political objectives. Some sought the restoration of older privileges, some defended local autonomy, and others resisted revenue demands, police authority, or changes in land relations.

b. Rao Tula Ram and Rewari

Rao Tula Ram became the most important rebel leader in the Rewari area. His authority was based on lineage, landholding, local influence, military resources, and the ability to mobilize men and supplies. Rewari's position south-west of Delhi made it strategically valuable. It connected the imperial centre with routes leading toward Rajasthan and the princely states of Alwar and Jaipur.

Rao Tula Ram's political activity involved more than battlefield resistance. He attempted to collect revenue, organize troops, secure weapons, and support the Delhi rebels. His administration was rooted in regional authority rather than in a fully developed central bureaucracy. The legitimacy of his rule derived from his local status and his opposition to Company interference.

The Rewari example demonstrates that the revolt could generate institutions of government even outside major cities. Revenue collection, military recruitment, provisioning, and communication were necessary for sustaining resistance. Nevertheless, these institutions remained dependent on the personal authority and material resources of the ruling family.

c. Raja Nahar Singh and Ballabhgarh

Ballabhgarh occupied an important position on the route between Delhi and the southern districts. Raja Nahar Singh's relationship with the rebellion reflected the political complexity of princely authority. As a local ruler, he possessed a territorial base and influence over officials, soldiers, and village communities.

Ballabhgarh's strategic importance lay in its location near the roads and routes connecting Delhi with Mathura and Agra. Control of the area affected the movement of troops and supplies. Nahar Singh's position also demonstrates that the participation of princely rulers cannot be reduced to a simple division between "rebel" and "loyalist." Local rulers had to balance relations with the Mughal court, rebel soldiers, neighbouring chiefs, and the British.

d. Jhajjar and the Politics of Survival

The Nawab of Jhajjar operated within a different political environment. Jhajjar had a Muslim ruling elite, a territorial administration, and military resources, but its survival depended on navigating between the rebel centre and the British authorities. The later British punishment of the Nawab illustrates the extent to which the colonial government treated regional rulers as politically responsible for rebellion.

Jhajjar also reveals the risks faced by local elites. Supporting the revolt could lead to military defeat, confiscation, execution, or the abolition of political authority. Remaining neutral or attempting to negotiate could also fail if the British interpreted such actions as disloyalty.

e. Village Communities and Local Resistance

In several parts of Haryana, resistance was organized without the direct leadership of a major prince. Village communities, local landholders, and clan networks attacked government offices, disrupted communications, resisted revenue collection, and expelled or intimidated colonial officials.

These movements should not be described as entirely spontaneous or unstructured. Village society possessed its own institutions of authority, including councils, headmen, kinship networks, and systems of customary arbitration. Such institutions could mobilize men, collect resources, and enforce collective decisions.

At the same time, local resistance had limited geographical coordination. A village or cluster of villages could challenge the Company successfully for a period without becoming part of a unified regional government. This produced a form

of political fragmentation that strengthened local resistance but weakened strategic coordination.

Comparative Analysis of Rebel Administration

a. Sources of Legitimacy

Delhi's legitimacy was primarily imperial. The rebels claimed to act in the name of the Mughal emperor and used the language of restoration. Haryana's legitimacy was more varied. It rested on dynastic authority, local custom, landholding rights, religious and social networks, and resistance to colonial intervention.

The distinction can be summarized as follows

Dimension	Delhi	Haryana
Main source of legitimacy	Mughal sovereignty	Local dynasties, landed authority, village institutions, and customary rights
Political centre	Red Fort and imperial court	Forts, estates, villages, and local headquarters
Administrative form	Centralizing and court-based	Decentralized and regionally varied
Military structure	Mutinous regiments and city forces	Local retainers, irregular cavalry, peasant levies, and princely troops
Fiscal base	Urban contributions, emergency levies, and disrupted land revenue	Land revenue, local resources, transit control, and contributions
Strategic function	Symbolic and military centre	Territorial support zone and supply hinterland

b. Revenue and Finance

Both Delhi and Haryana faced the same fundamental problem: rebellion required money, but the existing colonial revenue system could not be easily controlled.

In Delhi, the rebels attempted to obtain funds from urban elites and to recover revenue from surrounding territories. The city's markets and merchant networks were essential to the war effort. However, emergency taxation and compulsory contributions weakened cooperation.

In Haryana, revenue collection was more closely connected to local authority. Chiefs and zamindars could mobilize resources through existing relationships with cultivators. Yet the absence of a standardized system meant that revenue was collected unevenly. Some collections supported the Delhi rebels, while others financed local forces or were retained by regional leaders.

Thus, Delhi's fiscal system was urban and emergency-based, while Haryana's was territorial and locally embedded.

c. Military Recruitment

Delhi possessed a concentration of trained soldiers because mutinous Bengal Army regiments made the city their centre. This gave the rebels considerable military potential. Nevertheless, regimental loyalties often remained stronger than loyalty to a unified command.

Haryana depended more heavily on irregular forces, local retainers, cavalry, and village levies. These forces could move rapidly and exploit local knowledge. They were effective in attacking communications, disrupting administrative centres, and supporting guerrilla operations. However, they were less suited to prolonged siege warfare or coordinated large-scale operations.

The two systems could have complemented each other: Delhi provided trained infantry and artillery, while Haryana provided mobility, recruits, supplies, and territorial depth. In practice, coordination remained inconsistent.

d. Justice and Public Order

The Delhi administration attempted to preserve urban order through the kotwali, imperial orders, and existing legal

offices. It had to deal with theft, property disputes, market regulation, desertion, and conflict between civilians and soldiers.

In Haryana, justice was more localized. Village councils, landed authorities, and military leaders exercised authority according to customary practice and political necessity. The result was not the absence of administration but a plural system in which several institutions claimed the right to punish, arbitrate, and collect resources.

This difference reveals a broader contrast. Delhi tried to reconstruct an imperial centre using inherited offices. Haryana relied on the survival and adaptation of local institutions.

Delhi and Haryana as a Connected Political System

Although their administrative forms differed, Delhi and Haryana were closely connected. The revolt required interaction between the imperial centre and the countryside in at least four areas.

a. Supply

Delhi needed grain, fodder, animals, weapons, and money. The surrounding territories were essential to providing these resources. Without access to the countryside, the city could not sustain a prolonged defence.

b. Communication

Roads connecting Delhi with Rewari, Ballabgarh, Jhajjar, Gurgaon, and other areas served as channels for messages, military movements, and intelligence. Control over these routes influenced the ability of the rebels to coordinate action.

c. Political Recognition

Local rulers and chiefs could strengthen their authority by associating themselves with the Mughal emperor. Conversely, the imperial court benefited from the recognition and material support of regional leaders. This relationship was politically useful but not equivalent to centralized control.

d. Strategic Defence

The countryside could provide depth to Delhi's defence by attacking British communications and preventing the movement of supplies. However, this required synchronized military planning. The rebels did not establish an effective general staff capable of coordinating the city's defence with simultaneous operations in the surrounding districts.

Reasons for Failure

a. Fragmented Command

The rebellion brought together soldiers, princes, landlords, peasants, and urban groups with different priorities. Delhi's military and political leaders frequently disagreed over command, discipline, and strategy. Regional leaders in Haryana retained considerable autonomy and did not always subordinate their operations to the Delhi centre.

b. Weak Fiscal Coordination

The rebels lacked a regular and integrated system of revenue collection. Delhi's emergency levies could not replace stable taxation, while local chiefs often controlled resources independently. The inability to guarantee salaries and supplies weakened military discipline.

c. British Control of Communications

The British maintained important communication and reinforcement routes, especially through the Punjab. They were able to concentrate troops, transport artillery, and exchange intelligence more effectively than the rebels. The disruption of rebel communication between Delhi and the countryside reduced the strategic value of regional cooperation.

d. Unequal Military Organization

The rebel forces contained experienced soldiers and capable commanders, but they lacked unified training, logistics, and command. Local forces could resist effectively in their own territories but found it difficult to undertake coordinated operations against fortified British positions.

e. Colonial Retaliation

After the fall of Delhi, British forces conducted punitive campaigns across the surrounding region. The defeat of regional leaders led to executions, confiscations, and the reorganization of local authority. Colonial retaliation did not merely defeat rebel armies; it dismantled the political and social networks that had supported resistance.

Conclusion

The Revolt of 1857^[11] in Delhi and Haryana demonstrates that the uprising was neither a single centrally directed movement nor a collection of unrelated local disturbances. It was a connected but uneven political process.

Delhi became the symbolic centre of the rebellion because the Mughal emperor provided a language of sovereignty capable of challenging Company rule. The city also witnessed attempts to construct a central administration based on the imperial court, military councils, revenue collection, policing, and urban regulation. Yet these institutions remained improvised and contested.

Haryana, by contrast, represented a decentralized political environment. Regional rulers such as Rao Tula Ram, Raja Nahar Singh, and the Nawab of Jhajjar exercised authority through estates, forts, military retainers, and local networks.

Village communities and clan organizations also participated in resistance. Their actions disrupted colonial rule and contributed men, money, supplies, and strategic support to the wider revolt.

The relationship between Delhi and Haryana was therefore complementary but incomplete. Delhi offered imperial legitimacy and a political centre, while Haryana offered territorial resources and local mobilization. The failure to integrate these forms of authority into a durable system of command, finance, and communication was one of the major reasons for the defeat of the rebellion.

The comparative study of Delhi and Haryana also challenges interpretations that portray 1857^[12] simply as a military mutiny or an episode of disorder. The rebels attempted to create alternative structures of authority, but those structures were shaped by regional political traditions and social institutions. Their failure resulted not from the absence of political ideas but from the difficulty of uniting imperial restoration, regional autonomy, and popular resistance within a single administrative framework.

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