

Interpretations of 1857

History

Independent worksheet

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A new name

In 1909 a famous history book was written about the 1857 conflict in India. It had a name which was so shocking that the book was banned in Britain. The book was written by an Indian called Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. He called his history book *The Indian War of **Independence***. As a consequence of this 1909 book, there has been a debate about whether the 1857 conflict should be known as “the Indian war of independence.” By calling the conflict a war of independence Savarkar was suggesting that the rebel sepoy were fighting a just war against an unjust empire.



Indian Nationalism

Savarkar was not only a historian. He was also part of a campaign to try to make India independent of Britain. Savarkar was proud to be Indian and thought it was wrong for India to be a British colony. We call people with these kinds of beliefs '**nationalists**'. So Savarkar was a historian and nationalist.

What evidence is there to support Savarkar's claim that the 1857 conflict was a 'war of independence'? Firstly, the rebel sepoys went to Delhi and persuaded a descendent of the Mughals to become a new Mughal Emperor. Secondly, the fighting was fierce and involved large numbers of soldiers so the name 'war' might be more appropriate than 'uprising' or 'mutiny'. Thirdly, leaders like Lakshmibai said they wanted to be independent of Britain.



Interpreting the past

However, more recent historians have been critical of Savarkar's work. They argue that Savarkar's **political beliefs** made him **interpret** the past as if the rebels in 1857 were also nationalists. So, because Savarkar was writing at a time when nationalists were trying to end British rule of India, Savarkar's experiences shaped how he saw the past.



Evidence against 'war of independence'

What is the evidence against seeing the 1857 conflict as a 'war of independence'? Firstly, the conflict did not take place across all of India. Many areas were unaffected by the fighting so it might be more accurate to describe the conflict as local rather than national. Furthermore, when Lakshmibai declared she was fighting for independence, she meant she was fighting for the kingdom of Jhansi to be independent, not for India to be independent. Secondly, many Indians did not support the rebel sepoys. The modern historian, Faisal Devji has pointed out that ordinary people in Delhi turned against the rebel sepoys after the rebels carried out a massacre against British women and children.



The names of the conflict

So, how should we decide what to call the 1857 conflict in India? None of the names we have considered, ***Sepoy Mutiny***, ***National Uprising*** or ***Indian War of Independence***; seem to be completely accurate.

However, there is another important thing to consider about the name of the 1857 conflict. Some names could be offensive to some groups of people.



The names of the conflict

The name 'sepoy mutiny' was used by British supporters of the Empire to make it seem like the rebel sepoys were in the wrong and that it was right that Britain should rule India as a colony. Therefore using the name 'sepoy mutiny' could cause offence because it makes it seem like British control of India was justified. However, the name 'Indian war of independence' can also cause offence. Many Indian troops remained loyal to Britain and fought against the rebel sepoys. For example many soldiers who followed the Sikh religion fought with the British against the rebel sepoys. As a result, some Sikhs today find the term 'Indian war of independence' offensive because the name ignores the experience of Sikh soldiers.



Glossary

Independence: when a country or person becomes free of something which used to control them.

Interpret: seeing an event in a certain way (which may be different from how someone else sees the event).

Nationalist: someone who is proud of their nation and wants their nation to be an independent country.

Political beliefs: someone's personal views on who should hold power and how power should be used.



Comprehension Questions

1. What was the name of Savarkar's 1909 book?

Sentence starter: Savarkar's 1909 book was called...

2. What evidence could be used to explain why the 1857 conflict was a war of independence?
3. What evidence could be used to explain why the 1857 conflict was **not** a war of independence?
4. Why might an Indian nationalist be more likely to view the 1857 conflict as a war of independence?
5. Challenge: Why might calling the conflict the 'sepoy mutiny' cause offence?



Extension Question

6. Why does it matter what we call the 1857 conflict in India?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<i>One reason the name of the 1857 conflict matters is because some names might be misleading. For example...</i> <i>To explain this further...</i> <i>Another reason why the name of the 1857 conflict in India matters is because some names might be offensive. For example....</i> <i>To explain this further....</i>	-Empire -Colony -Justify -Nationalist -Perspectives -Sepoys -Accurate

