

Mapping the global trans cultural ethos of Sepoys folk songs of 1857, South East Asia

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Abstract

The 1857 Rebellion, remembered as the “First War of Independence”, marked the first large-scale resistance led by *sepoys*, alongside the mass scale local populations across the Indian subcontinent. Though the rebellion was confined to Indian soil, its impact extended to Southeast Asia, inspiring anti-colonial movements in Singapore, Burma, Malaya, the Philippines, and even Japan. It demonstrated that British rule could be challenged and defeated. The resistance initially began with the 34th Bengal Infantry Regiment, where *sepoys* rebelled due to various socio-religious and economic reasons, including new army regulations, forced labour migrations, and fixed taxes, all of which clashed with their religious beliefs. The *sepoys*, part of the British army, were ordered to cross the Indus River, leaving behind their caste practices, which fuelled distrust toward the British motives. Additionally, many soldiers who had been deployed abroad became active participants in the rebellion. Even while stationed in Southeast Asia, *sepoys* resisted British rule in subtle ways. These acts of defiance were often captured in the folk songs and oral traditions of regions like Burma, Rangoon, and the Philippines, creating a cultural connection across borders. The songs, in languages like Awadhi, Bundeli, Punjabi, and Urdu, mixed with the local cultures and even influenced Japanese literature. This paper explores these cross-cultural interactions, focusing on folk songs and legends that reflect the rebellion's influence beyond India. Songs like "*Bharat ke Veer*" became popular across borders, symbolizing the shared struggle against colonial rule. The references to the 1857 rebellion gained cultural and literary significance throughout Southeast Asia, fostering a common anti-colonial sentiment. By examining these folk traditions and songs, the paper highlights how the rebellion's impact extended beyond India, shaping cultural and political resistance across the Asiatic continent,

and forming lasting ties between India and Southeast Asia in their shared fight against imperialism.

Keywords: Folklore, 1857, South East Asia, First War of Independence, Bharat, Rangoon

Introduction

Historic movements throughout history are not merely sporadic; rather, they are the result of ongoing civilizational struggles with socioeconomic ramifications that culminate in the creation of history. In the history of anti-colonial movements around the world, the Indian independence movement of 1857 is extremely significant. Numerous titles have been used to refer to this massive rebellion against British authority in India, which has been researched and re-studied in relation to its "nature," which suggests the historiographical school. At its height, the East India Company faced widespread opposition, which even caused its vibrations to spread to England, where the Queen eventually took control and established her authority.

The Indian struggle for independence has long been a part of Indian history, with 1857 frequently cited as the beginning of the movement that resulted from British colonial exploitation of India through war and conquest, along with other socioeconomic instability, famine, draughts, and tribal insurgencies that led to India's First War for Independence. All things considered, it is the first time that Indians, from princely state rulers to poor peasants, have united to combat the same enemy, the British (Savarkar 1966). Due to the abundance of materials on the subject, 1857 frequently dominates the main points of historical disputes and discussions for years. The Sepoy Mutiny, the War of Independence, violence against British women, or the emergence of popular participation—peasants, the Hindu-Muslim plot, etc.—are some of the events that are frequently depicted as defining 1857. There was more to the events of 1857 than the notorious "Cow-Pig" smeared cartridges, the Indian Sepoys' rebellion against the British, the Army's reforms, the issue of perpetual revenue fixations, the war of successions that affected Indian princesses, the peasant uprising, or the Hindu-Muslim Unity that had been promoted to counter the popular cause of the rebellion by the Indian gentry.

In the 20th century, when there was a lot of emphasis on delivering "histories from below," an effort was made to excavate and create the oppressed or the popular character of the 1857 to overflowing with the Emerging school of Subaltern Historiography. These answers, which frequently place the Indian side of the uprising in context, have frequently gone unrecorded and forgotten, as have their involvement, outcomes, and even role. It is necessary to draw attention to these Indian reactions, which are unfinished projects that exist on the periphery of many continents, nations, spaces, etc., in order to add fresh viewpoints and illumination to the conversation. The voices of Sepoys and women from diverse communities, such as the Dalit, other depressed, and tribal classes, have frequently been used in these voices. These voices are now being re-documented into mainstream history writing based on oral narratives, folklore, and collective memory.

This whole perspective of unearthing the Rebellion, from the marginal aspect, gave rise to a new genre of cultural representations and Identity creations; which was taken by the people of the local community. Very often the War of Independence and its character came into question, relating the major participation by the local communities which comprised of these 'insurgent- sepoys'- the band of dacoits and sepoys who formed these armies. Another relative question, to dig into the Global responses, of 1857 and how the South Eastern regions, look up to the resistance. This new inquiry and unconventional modes of doing history led to a whole new genre of Diaspora Literature, songs of Migrations and often songs of 1857, scripted in the marginal memory. Contributions of Indian people from diverse backgrounds started emerging and as a result, Local community histories and Oral histories started replacing the old Imperialistic English spaces of archives.

Making of the 'Insurgent Sepoy- Rebel Army'

The bloody war of 1857, which was led by the rebel soldiers actually were at the backbone of the insurgency. This rebel army, often pertains to requesting the military organisation, standing army (Streets, H. 2017) further taking the foremost question of the organisation of the military. Indian princes, who were ruling the states, never had any standing army to fight the enemy. As Indian's never fought with the international armies, the whole fight was amongst themselves only, to which British's under the policy of annexations instituted the standing armies in the same states. These

armies, comprised of English generals, leading the training the fellow uncivilized Indian's. These trainings' were often curbed under the Whiteman's burden's where they were often seen training the Indians in military might. Looking at the military aspect Gary Rand's, and his military diary who himself was an E..I.C posted officer during 1857, becomes quite important. Essential aspects like the tussle between the British East India Company Forces and with the structured and well-tested military hierarchical system was a major issue. Backed by good intelligence, home and logistical backup on one hand, and on the other hand, the mere soldiers of the Bengal 34th Native Cavalry was an incompetent match in altogether. The rebels' forces, which later joined these Bengal Army, were comprising of the local gentry, populace and allied forces. Often termed and written down as 'insurgent – rebel sepoys' in the British led archives, majorly lacked an organised forms of strategy. These rebel armies led by the princely states rulers, for the particular areas were mostly fighting isolated battles at multiple locations with no means to either communicate or coordinate with each other. Moreover, the fight by the British East India Forces was based upon as the response of the sacking of the Delhi' by these rebel sepoys, which led to a showdown of some Twenty-one days at Hindu Rao, Delhi ridge. These rebels, even without the appropriate equipment's, and lack of funds, as well, without no prior training and weaponry handicaps majorly relied on guerrilla tactics with a view to maximise damage on the enemy forces. These rebels which hailed majorly from the northern zone of India, comprising majorly from Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Rajasthan etc. from various castes and class but majorly landed peasants, or tillers. even saw a fight for the same at their respective places and states. The guerrilla operations continued for another one year even though the bulk of the Rebellion was crushed by July 1858, finally claiming Delhi back to Company.

One of the major reason which often gets attributed for the rebellion is the army reform laws which were introduced admits 1850's which stated also foreign travels and stripping of ranks which would have had affected the salary of the sepoys. These foreign travels were actually introduced to accumulate the British expansion policies in creating more colonies at the expense of Indian colonies alike. There was a wide resistance which saw the culmination into 1857, as according to the Indian superstitions, foreign travels actually ended up losing the caste and class. As these armies, employed eighty-six percent (Chandra, Bipin. 2012) of upper class Hindu gentry. Which often led to widespread issues and clashes amongst the army. To some of the sepoys went out, who couldn't resist, as these salaries were something which were

running their households and even sponsoring foreign visits to Burma, Indonesia and more popularly Rangoon. These men in the battalions led by, were mostly from Nepal, or Gorkha some Bihar and mostly from Awadh too. These men, who migrated out to fight for the British to help in colonising the other South East Asian and other lands, were also the same men, who tried to fight or space the Independence war in the memory of the global responses as many sepoys who came back, often narrated the how they were informed, as 1857, Rebellion became a world news, which was one of the first instance to disturb and dislodged the Imperialistic forces in the continent.

Global Responses of 1857

The British account of 1857, was guided by their own political and imperial motivation,¹⁸ because they did not want it to impact other colonies in a negative way. Moreover, the aim was to project the racial superiority of the British as well as the fact that the British were attempting to educate and uplift the Indian society from its primitive and orthodox values.¹⁹ British writings depicting the superiority of the Britishers, were then circulated across the continents—these writings exaggerated the heroism of their citizens against the revolt in India.²⁰ Books such as *The Defence of Lucknow* by Lord Alfred Tennyson and *In the Round Tower at Jhansi 1857* by Christina Rossetti magnified the valour of Britishers who fought the rebels. It is interesting to note that, sometime in Oct 1857, news about the gallant act of Ms. Ulrica Wheeler, daughter of Maj Gen Hugh Wheeler, Chief Commander at Kanpur, started appearing in British press²¹. It was stated that Ms. Wheeler had very bravely fought the rebels till the last and in the end she jumped into the well to death. Ms. Wheeler, thus, became a legendary figure exemplifying the bravery and purity of British women who would rather die than be violated at the hands of the gentry rebelling. However, after a span of eight years, it became apparent that the earlier known account of her bravery and death was false as according to historian Sir George Trevelyan, Ms. Wheeler has been rescued by Ali Khan and was alive and living under a Muslim identity²². The British literature also exaggerated the violence by the Indians with a view to sensationalise the same, and thereafter arouse hatred amongst the British populace and eventually justify their own retribution against the Indians. The most glaring example of this misrepresentation was the manner in which the Kanpur massacre was reported, wherein in August 1857, around 200 women and children, who had been earlier taken hostage by the revolt, were massacred by the butchers and their bodies were hacked to pieces and thrown into a well. ²³ The literature also deliberately chose to overlook the facts

about their own brutality against the Indians. In fact, Malleson went a step further and claimed that there was no excessive retaliation on the part of the British. He even attempted a justification of the killing of rebels by blowing them from the barrels of the guns on the ground that it was so authorised by courts martial and necessary to act as deterrent. Interestingly, some British authors also blamed Russia for inciting the mutiny by claiming that the Russian agents had bribed Indian contractors to supply beef fat instead of mutton fat, which was used in the manufacture of the paper cartridges. ²⁴ The event of 1857 left a deep and lasting mark on the British psyche which led to increased fear and racism among the British.²⁵ Just to illustrate the level to which the minds of the British were impacted, a British officer, Capt Costello— who was part of the team that executed a rebel Alum Bheg in Sialkot— chose to bring the skull of the deceased, as a trophy, on his return to Britain. The skull later became the main historical artefact, based on which research was done by Prof Kim A Wagner culminating in the book *The Skull of Alum Bheg*. The significance the Rebellion to the British academia can also be gauged from what Lord Cromer wrote in his memoirs “I wish the younger generation of English would read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the history of the Indian War of Independence.

Indian – and South – East Asian Responses to 1857

In the first few years following the rebellion of 1857, none of the Indians dared to write about the rebels’ cause as they were badly terrorised having seen the brutal and mass killings of their fellow countrymen. To add to it, many Urdu poets and reporters, who favoured the rebels’ cause had been either punished or killed by the British, thereby dissuading the Indians further from writing about their response. As such, the perspective of the rebels could not be recorded in the manner the Britishers did, as in the second half of the nineteenth century, very few Indians were literate. Moreover, the availability of printing resources in Hindi/ native languages during that period was very limited. The situation got compounded further, as numerous Hindi authors and scholars, out of fear and survival, praised the British and gave incorrect versions of 1857. Notwithstanding the above, amongst the people and regions which had fought against the British, the memories remained alive in the form of folksongs, ballads, poems, etc. which inspired Indians in the next decades to formally record the same. The first such writing giving out the Indian perspective was by V D Savarkar, who wrote *The First War of Independence* in 1908 in Marathi language. Savarkar

termed 1857 as a national struggle and highlighted how Hindus and Muslims had rallied together to fight their common enemy. Other Indian historians such as R C Majumdar, S N Sen etc. who became the community historians also wrote about the event from a nationalist perspective. Post-Independence, many more Indian historians and scholars wrote books in Hindi as well as other vernacular languages. They termed the rebellion as a milestone event which marked the beginnings of India's struggle for Independence. European Responses The events of 1857 were reported upon extensively in the European press. The Resistance was portrayed in the French, Italian, Czech, Hungarian, Spanish, Portuguese and the German media in a divergent manner. The underlining characteristic of the coverage was that, each nation in Europe viewed the news from India highlighting whatever was in sync with their history and ideology. The nations that were imperialist in their approach, viewed 1857 as a warning sign, whereas other European nations, such as Hungary, Czech and Bulgaria, that were still struggling for nationhood viewed this event differently.

Its important to note that, 1857 the people of China and India were engaged in fighting the Second Opium War (1856-1860) and the Indian Rebellion respectively, against a common aggressor i.e. the British. Moreover, there was no direct connect between the people of these two regions as regards the struggle was concerned. Notwithstanding this, the actions by the rebels in India in 1857 forced the British to take a back foot whereby they diverted their forces midway to India as against their intended destination in China, thereby helping the cause of China. Keeping in view the above fact, it was but natural that the Chinese had sympathy as well as admiration for the people of India against the British Empire. From the limited writings available, it emerges that the people of China were deeply concerned about the Indian rebels and that they wanted the revolt to succeed. However, these sentiments by the Chinese people could not get propagated in a wider academic space because at that point of time China did not have its own vernacular newspapers. Irish Response. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Ireland was fighting for independence from the British rule and their fight for nationhood had also failed in 1848. In 1857, Ireland received the news about the 'breaking of the rebellion' through newspapers, telegraphs and also personal letters. The happenings about the Indian Rebellion were received by the Irish people with much hope and anticipation, that the rebels would be able to overthrow the British rule in India. The Indian

Rebellion provided an inspiration to many Irish nationalists to continue their fight for their Independence from the British. On 04 July 1857, a news item in the Irish newspaper— Nation stated that “The revolt in India had exposed the weakness of the British rule. The Nation in fact compared the Indian Rebellion of 1857 with the Irish Movement and highlighted that the actions by the armed and disciplined men of Bengal Native Infantry had lessons for the freedom fighters of any other country, including Ireland”. The Kilkenny Journal highlighted the valiant struggle of the rebels and stated that this event was an inspiration to other colonies

1857, in Folk songs Awadhi songs

While representing the Indian women contributions, very carefully space was crafted for the elitist queens, which served the nationalist vested interests. (Narayan, 1998) Such distorted cultural representations led to exclusion of these lesser/ ‘other’ women who existed in the peripheries/ margins belonging dominantly to the peasant class, since peasants do not write their histories – which led to their interactions with the rebellion went undocumented, which later led to erasure of them in the pages of history (Pati 2010, xvii). The rebellion was always being ‘mapped’ around certain dominant regions – leaving the peripheries. Historical school of thought which stressed on ‘Popular character’ (Guha 1983) of the rebellion, further led to tapping of the rebellion 1857, in the folklore –suggesting 1857 still existing in the peripheries which led to works focused on the diversities and the specificities of the rebellion (Joshi 2007), further also a stress on the demographic background of the peasants (Bayly 1983). Thus a popular discourse of labelling the lesser peasant communities as dacoits and further classifying them into criminal tribes (Mayaram 2014) thus even led to their exclusions from even the census archives.

The couplets taken from a popular song, which became popular in Eastern UP, Gorkhpur

*“ Hum aaye hai Toofan banker, samrajay main gooron kie,
Desh joojh raha hai saan satavan kie yudoon main”*

Translation: We have come as a storm brake, the British empire has been ruined, the country is dying where the people are sitting.

While looking for the lost archives or histories which exists in the ‘Other’ form of history writing the War, uncovered the participation of many lesser known communities which were often classified under the subcategories of – Royalty, landed aristocracy, courtesans, prostitute’s, commoners, tribal and Dalit etc. Recent works around Dalit women participating the One such community which was highly sensualized was the peasant communities of Brahmins, Rajputs and ahir’s aloke Jaats and Gurjars, which were generally classified as criminal tribes by the British subjects. Haling to the peripheries and surviving on looting and plundering they were actually the backbone of the First war of Independence Savarkar also attests them as the ones who fought with full valour, as they comprised the footing soldiers in the war. Two very prominent Icons of 21st centuries which came up as a resultant of Oral and Memory studies which are a resultant of community histories are these many new leaders and revolutionaries have recently sprung up – Men like Dhan Singh Gurjar and Umrao Singh Parmar, Tulla Rao Ram have recently emerged as the leaders resonating as the face of these dominant peasant communities. Yet these tracings and creations often go silent on the Women’s question. Women in these communities are often sidelined and often resorted to the Homely atmosphere of the house.

Famous Nepali poem, another which resonates in Eastern U.P, ‘‘ Lakhno ko Sawai’’, says

*‘‘ Gae soogurko boswa haali kartos banayo,
Daat le Kartoos chayaapi banook bharayo,
Chaare varan chhattis jaat sab yyakai garaayo,
Chhatri ra brahman tesai bela jaagyaa,
Jaati ko kura jhiki gul garn lagayaa’’*

The empire was always showcased as having a masculine character, were women as mere ‘objects’ and the Indian Male were attributed to Effeminacy (Sinha, 1987:226). Nation and Gender both social constructions, which have been analogous in many social and historical contexts. The Company and its Subjects were always portrayed as these ‘Masculine objects ‘and its subjects were embodied as the week, meek, barbarous and uncivilized often effeminate. The western stereotypes of gender categories and their models of nationalism and nation- state came into cultures and worldviews through colonialism in India (Sinha, Chatterjee, 1999).

Masculinity and femininity are two predetermined sets, governed by social norms which always alter in tandem with each other. Colonialism is a point of convergence of the Western stereotypes of gender categories, political and economic domain. The West justified colonialism as a 'Civilizing mission' by propagating its concept of modernity and progress. There are various ways of looking at asymmetric gender roles in the nation. Nation and gender intimately participate in the connotation of each other. Nations are gendered, with the asserting the Masculine character of the Nation and the Englishmen, a very modern ideal of masculinity was shaped, with characteristic features of Manly Greek physique, which counterpoised to this stereotype: languor, softness, sensuality and Effeminacy was thus propagated. Colonial ideologies of modernity led to a progress fashioning of the rigid masculine self. The discourse changed the perceptions towards age, gender and the history in the colonised county. He further argues that it produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio – economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity. (Nandy, 1978). The nexus between the political dominations and the gender stereotypes is further legitimised by the Oriental's discourses. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the distinction between masculine and feminine races as a pervasive theme and appeared in connection with Bengalis, who demonstrated a noble lack of interest in proving their manhood by overt signs of martial, leather- faced masculinity. They much preferred the martial races as Sikhs and Mohammedans which exhibited aggressive spirit. The imperial constitution of politics of colonial masculinity' where the British superiority over the Indian subjects was expressed in terms of the distinction between the self-controlled and 'manly' Englishman and the over- emotional 'effeminate' Bengali (Sinha 1987, 226).

The Nationalist School on its Reconstruction and Revivalist project gained major momentum, in the Early Nineteenth century. It was the earliest school of thought to actually to beliefs in the Indian People's participation, and further called it as the very first war of independence. As it was the very time in the history of India, when the masses have come to avenge the common enemy. Moreover, the proponent of the school attested to the Mass participation of Indian women, in the rebellion from the Peasant communities, moreover they projected and compartmentalised them into the notions of 'Bharat Mata discourse' or the 'Ideal women discourse'. The conceptions of 'mother'- 'motherland, mother –hood, motherland- have served as the most universal and potent symbols of imagining the nation (Gupta 2001) and modify the

constructs of their ‘femininity’ around the prevailing political ideology. This very compartmentalisation of Nationalistic history only reserved the pages of history of the Elitist/ Ruling Women who fought the rebellion leaving out the marginal contributions. Such deliberate erasures lead to the wash-out of names and contributions of these women in the historical spaces. Historical deeds of women have been so fundamental and exclamatory that such examples and contributions from such predominantly rural class women are hardly been accorded and moreover left in the peripheries.

While representing the Indian women contributions, very carefully space was crafted for the elitist queens, which served the nationalist vested interests. (Narayan, 1998) Such distorted cultural representations led to exclusion of these lesser/ ‘other’ women who existed in the peripheries/ margins belonging dominantly to the peasant class, since peasants do not write their histories – which led to their interactions with the rebellion went undocumented, which later led to erasure of them in the pages of history (Pati 2010). The rebellion was always being ‘mapped’ around certain dominant regions – leaving the peripheries. Historical school of thought which stressed on ‘Popular character’ (Guha 1983) of the rebellion, further led to tapping of ‘57, in the folklore –suggesting rebellion still existing in the peripheries which led to works focused on the diversities and the specificities of the rebellion (Joshi, 2007), further also a stress on the demographic background of the peasants (Bayly 1983). Thus a popular discourse of labelling the lesser peasant communities as dacoits and further classifying them into criminal tribes (Mayaram 2014) thus even led to their exclusions from even the census archives.

The study delves into the far-reaching cultural impact of India's First War of Independence, particularly through the lens of the sepoys’ folk songs and oral traditions. The 1857 Rebellion, which is recognized as a significant resistance movement against British rule, was not only a domestic revolt but also had far-reaching consequences beyond Indian borders, influencing anti-colonial sentiments across Southeast Asia. The study examines the role of sepoys who, stationed in places like Burma, Rangoon, Malaya, and the Philippines, served as agents of cultural exchange. Their stories of defiance and resistance were embedded in the folk traditions of these regions, creating a cross-cultural ethos that transcended borders. The sepoys, hailing from various regions of India like Awadh, Bundelkhand, and Punjab, carried with them folk traditions and songs

that expressed their struggles against colonial oppression. These songs not only inspired local populations but also became woven into the cultural fabric of Southeast Asia. Oral traditions and folk songs such as "*Bharat Ke Veer*" gained traction in these foreign lands, symbolizing resistance and rebellion against imperial rule. Additionally, these cultural exchanges were further enriched as the sepoys interacted with local languages and traditions, with their stories and songs becoming part of local folklore, including in Japan and other parts of Asia. The paper also highlights how the rebellion of 1857 became a touchstone in Southeast Asian resistance movements. The sepoys' folk traditions acted as carriers of revolutionary ideas, creating a transcultural exchange that influenced literary, social, and political movements across the region. The paper uses various methodologies, including the study of folk songs, oral histories, and regional literature, to trace this transcultural flow of resistance against British colonialism.

In conclusion, the study illuminates the transcultural ethos created by the sepoys of 1857, whose resistance against British colonialism resonated far beyond the borders of India. Their folk songs and oral traditions acted as a conduit for the transmission of revolutionary ideas across Southeast Asia, blending Indian and local cultures in a shared resistance to colonial rule. The paper reveals how the sepoys' lived experiences during the rebellion not only contributed to India's struggle for independence but also became a source of inspiration for anti-colonial movements across Southeast Asia. The cultural exchanges, particularly through folk songs, demonstrate how the spirit of rebellion crossed geographic and linguistic boundaries, creating a legacy of shared resistance that transcended national borders.

The study concludes that the sepoys' influence in Southeast Asia during the 1857 rebellion was not only military but also deeply cultural. Their songs and stories were instrumental in creating a shared vocabulary of resistance that connected Indian and Southeast Asian societies in their fight against imperialism. These transcultural interactions enriched the anti-colonial movements in the region and left an enduring legacy in the cultural memory of both India and Southeast Asia. It cannot be denied that currently the typical understanding and knowledge of a scholar warrior of the Indian Military about this important historical event is limited to the domestic perspective of the 1857. This reminds the famous quote by George Orwell who said "the most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history". Herein lies the profound significance of the need to know this Indian historical event in its entirety including the

international dimension of 1857 which will help to enhance the existing perspective of a scholar warrior about this event. The Rebellion of 1857 successfully ‘dented’ the prestige of the British to a large extent and also erased the idea of British invincibility. The Rebellion found a detailed mention not only in public and political debates in countries like UK, USA, Russia, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, but also stirred popular imagination which resulted in publication of numerous novels and other fictional accounts, decades after the event. The subject also assumes importance because it inspired the people of other regions, faced with a similar situation, to fight against their colonial masters. Indian Army scholars need to get over their hesitation and study this conflict, in greater detail, as part of military history. To give it due importance, 1857 should also form part of promotion and competitive exams. The subject will also help the Indian public in better understanding about the struggle and sacrifices made by the Indians during 1857 that sowed seeds for the future nationalist struggle. By documenting these interactions, the paper underscores the importance of folk traditions as a lens through which historical events and their wider impact can be understood, contributing to a broader understanding of global resistance against colonialism.

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