

# Crises of Sovereignty: Reinterpreting 1857 and 1947 in Indian State Formation

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the events of 1857 and 1947 as critical moments in the trajectory of Indian state formation, conceptualizing both as distinct yet interconnected crises of sovereignty. Rather than treating 1857 solely as a “mutiny” or 1947 merely as a moment of decolonization, the study argues that both events constituted structural ruptures that reconfigured authority, legitimacy, and political order. It argues that sovereignty was contested and transferred across colonial and postcolonial contexts, and through an examination of legislative records, administrative archives, and major historiographical interventions, the paper analyzes how these processes were constructed and reconstructed over time. The uprising of 1857 exposed vulnerabilities in the East India Company’s governance structure and precipitated the formal assumption of authority by the British Crown, thereby centralizing imperial sovereignty. Conversely, the transfer of power in 1947 marked the end of colonial rule but simultaneously revealed deep contradictions embedded in late colonial constitutional arrangements, particularly regarding territorial division, communal representation, and administrative continuity. By engaging with perspectives from nationalist, subaltern, and constitutional historiography, the article demonstrates that both 1857 and 1947 should be understood as transformative moments that reshaped institutional frameworks and political imaginaries of the state. Ultimately, the study contends that Indian state formation emerged not as a linear progression but as a layered process shaped by crises, negotiations, and redefinitions of sovereignty.*

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Britishcrown, East India Company (EIC), Transfer of Power, Governance, Revolt of 1857, State Formation

## INTRODUCTION

The analysis of the years 1857 and 1947 enables a deeper historical understanding to India’s independence, as though separated by ninety years, these moments were deeply interconnected in shaping the trajectory of colonial authority, nationalist imagination, and state formation. Scholars like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1909), Rudrangshu Mukherjee (1909) have attempted to interpret these years not as isolated events, but as decisive ruptures within longer historical processes marked by shifts in society, politics, and administration. As the revolt of 1857 though failed military uprising, it weakened the legitimacy of the East India Company and compelled the reconstitution of imperial governance under the British Crown (Misra, B. B. (1977). Incontrarily 1947 witnessed the dismantling of formal colonial sovereignty and the transfer of power to indigenous leadership, resulting in the creation of independent nation-states. Weberian perspective, refers to rational–legal authority i.e., the colonial state had constructed a bureaucratic apparatus grounded in hierarchy, codified rules, and district-based administration. (Weber, M. (1978)). After independence, this structure was not dismantled; instead, it was repurposed to serve a sovereign democratic state. Postcolonial theorists such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Sudipta Kaviraj (1991) have argued that the modern Indian state represents not a complete break from colonial governance but a reconfiguration of inherited governmental rationalities within a democratic framework. The immediate challenges of 1947 further reinforced this continuity. Partition required refugee rehabilitation, border demarcation, integration of princely states, and constitutional reorganization, all of which demanded a strong centralized bureaucracy (Bipin Chandra, 1999). Rather than decentralizing authority, the postcolonial state expanded bureaucratic capacity in order to stabilize and consolidate sovereignty. Thus, both 1857 and 1947 intensified state consolidation under different ideological banners, illustrating that the making of modern India was shaped as much by administrative continuity as by political transformation.

Ultimately, these developments reveal that independence was neither sudden nor linear. Therefore, both events reflect complex transformations in power, legitimacy, and administrative restructuring. Together, they demonstrate that the formation of modern India was shaped through cycles of resistance, adaptation, and state consolidation rather than through a single decisive break from the past. Between the years 1857 and 1947 lies a difference of legitimacy. As 1857, administrative authority was justified in the name of imperial stability and order.

After 1947, the same administrative structure was justified in the name of national unity, development, and democratic governance. Yet in both years, crisis led to further centralization of state power. Thus, the transformation from Indian Civil Servants (ICS) to Indian Administrative Service (IAS) reflects not a rupture in administrative practice but a continuity in institutional logic, where sovereignty changed while bureaucratic foundations suffered. The making of modern India was therefore shaped as much by administrative continuity as by political transformation.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The year 1857 and 1947, both the events has been a persistent theme across histories of independent India, one as the first large-scale anti-colonial uprising and another as the culmination of nationalist struggle. The Revolt of Independence has long been described as the first war of Independence, initiated by sepoys of the East India Company army in Meerut in May 1857 due to greased cartridges issue, pay discrimination and religious and cultural interference. However, unlike 1947 which was organized and negotiated primarily by the Indian National Congress, it was a sepoy mutiny as suggested by Britishers. By calling it sepoy mutiny, Britishers framed it as a limited military discipline problem, not a national revolt or a serious political threat. This colonial interpretation significantly influenced early historical writing and shaped subsequent historiographical debates.

Similarly, scholars like V.D. Savarkar, framed 1857 as the “First War of Indian Independence,” presenting it as a unified national uprising against British rule (1857) This perspective emphasized Hindu–Muslim unity and patriotic resistance thereby embedding 1857 within a teleological narrative of eventual independence in 1947, this view was challenged by R. C. Majumdar as he saw 1857 lacked a coherent national ideology which had a series of regional revolts and military mutinies, (1957). Rudrangshu Mukherjee and Eric Stokes also support local grievances, agrarian tensions, and popular resistance, complicating earlier nationalist narratives. These works suggested that 1857 social and regional dimension, treated the revolt as discrete episode rather than trajectory of state restructuring. (1986). In contrast to 1947, historians have focused predominantly on nationalism, scholar Sunil Khilnani have examined the consolidation of the postcolonial state, focusing on centralizing impulse embedding within the project of national unity and development (1997). Partition studies mainly concern the human cost of territorial division, foregrounding themes of displacement, communal violence, along with identity formation. Yet, 1947 studied as foundational rupture without systematically engaging in crises of 1857 that similarly reshaped sovereignty and administrative authority.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the data collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of governmental reports, old newspapers, military records, ICS to IAS Transition Records and Emergency regulations records post-1857 and post-1947. The historical analytical methodology to study the transfer of power in Indian Civil Service under the political parties and several nationalist movements that existed between 1930-1950. Both primary

and secondary sources integrated to reconstruct events, interpret motivations, and analyze institutional dynamics during partition. Secondary sources generally consist of recorded material which help in framing it further. Several historians’ analyses, books, and peer reviewed articles, provide critical review of colonial governance, Indianisation, and the role of bureaucracy in nationalist politics. The data from both primary and secondary sources were qualitatively analysed to understand the complex dynamics of governance conflicts and moreover their implications for the normal functioning of the independent India.

## RESULT

It is evident from legislative, executive, and institutional records that both 1857 and 1947 were marked with a legal reconstitution of sovereignty accompanied by administrative consolidation. Transfer of power from authority to the East India Company, to the British Crown was affected through the Government of India Act 1858, which abolished the Company’s governing role and vested authority in a Secretary of State for India, assisted by a Council (Parliamentary Archives). During Parliamentary debates of 1858 in the Parliament of the United Kingdom, members repeatedly stressed on the need for British government to have direct administration control over India and prevent further instability (Hansard, HC Deb 1858). Queen Victoria’s Proclamation of 1 November 1858 firmly articulated guarantees of religious non-interference, equal protection under law, and clemency, thereby publicly redefining the basis of imperial authority. Records of Home Department proceedings between 1858 and 1862 documented the reorganization of executive authority, reinforcement of district administration, and restructuring of the army, including by revised ratios and modified command structures (India Office Records). During this period, the letters of Governor-General Lord Canning refers to the imperative centralized executive control in the aftermath of rebellion (Parliamentary Archives). On contrary, a legal and administrative restructuring is evident in 1947 as with India’s Independence, British sovereignty ended, leading to Dominions of India and Pakistan, by transferring legislative authority to constituent assemblies (Constituent Assembly of India, 1948–1949). Debates at the Constituent Assembly of India between 1946 and 1949 explicitly states that affirmation of sovereign authority should be by the people and administration needed to be continue during transition (Constituent Assembly of India, 1948–1949). Speeches delivered by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in October 1949 emphasized on the preservation of the All India Services as essential to national unity and effective governance (Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, 1949). Speeches delivered by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel in October 1949 :

*“If you do not adopt this article, then do not have a united India. If you want to have a united India, you must have a good All India Service which has the independence to speak out its mind, which has a sense of security that you will stand by your word and not allow them to be humiliated or frightened”* (Constituent Assembly Debates).

Draft constitutional provisions, later incorporated as Part XIV of the Constitution, institutionalised protections for civil servants and ensured administrative continuity. Personnel records from 1947–1950 indicate the absorption of former Indian Civil Service officers into the

newly constituted Indian Administrative Service, while district level administrative procedures remained structurally intact. Provincial government files from Punjab and Bengal (1947-48) further document the extensive use of emergency regulations, curfews, and extensive directives to manage communal violence and refugee rehabilitation during Partition. Across both historical junctures, statutory enactments, executive correspondence, and administrative records reveal formal redefinition of sovereignty accompanied by reinforcement rather than dismantling of centralized bureaucratic authority.

## DISCUSSION

What began as a military uprising which confine within Bengal army soon became the Revolt of 1857, formally expanded into a wider political and territorial rebellion. Courtmartial records and military correspondence from Meerut confirm that immediate grievances centred on the introduction of the new Enfield rifle cartridges, widely believed to be greased with cow and pig fat, thereby offending both Hindu and Muslim religious sensibilities (Proceedings of the General Court-Martial, Meerut, 1857). Official reports indicate that sepoys dissatisfaction was connected to wider fears about annexation policies and the Doctrine of Lapse introduced by Lord Dalhousie (Government of India, 1856–1857) Although Bahadur Shah Zafar been quickly declared as the emperor in Delhi, the remaining order and intelligence reports show that there was little central coordination between the different rebel centres (Proclamations issued in Delhi, 1857) such as Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi, and Awadh functioned with regional priorities and separate command structures. To which R. C. Majumdar argues, the revolt lacked a unified national programme and operated as a cluster of localized uprisings (Mukherjee, R. 1984). Further Eric Stokes exposes the agrarian grievances in Awadh which differ military grievances in the Bengal Army, signifying structural fragmentation rather than ideological cohesion (Stokes, E, 1986). Records of Indian officer refer to the Britisher's using telegraph lines and railway networks to mobilize reinforcements from Punjab and Bombay and to isolate rebel territories (Constituent Assembly of India, 1949, October 10). The Punjab's relative loyalty to the British Crown proved decisive; official correspondence highlights the strategic importance of Sikh regiments and newly recruited forces in suppressing the rebellion (Punjab Administration Records, 1857–58). This logistical asymmetry significantly constrained rebel expansion. Revenue records and intelligence reports from rebelheld territories show irregular taxation and weak fiscal systems, resultant into decline of the revolt due to financial and administrative weaknesses (Home Department Intelligence Reports, 1857–58). Though proclamations restoring the Mughal rule, there is little evidence that a proper administrative system was created to replace colonial government. Internal differences also hindered unity. In Jhansi, resistance focused on the issue of royal succession after annexation; in Awadh, landholders opposed the revenue policies around dynastic succession following annexation; in Awadh, taluqdari landholders mobilized against revenue policies; in Delhi, the symbolic restoration of Mughal sovereignty dominated political rhetoric. These localized motivations did not converge into a coherent

constitutional or institutional blueprint. As Rudrangshu Mukherjee observes in his study of Awadh, leadership tensions and limited military discipline further weakened rebel command structures (Guha, R. 1983). Despite the intensity of resistance, the British managed to suppress the revolt through coordinated administrative and military measures.

In 1947, once again India witnessed the realization of its long struggle for independence. What began as a constitutional transfer of power under the framework of the Indian Independence Act, 1947 soon transformed into a profound political and territorial rupture marked by Partition. Through the termination of British paramountcy, formation of two sovereign dominion were born India and Pakistan. However, contemporary administrative records and correspondence between provincial governors reveal that the transition was accompanied by large-scale communal violence, mass displacement, and institutional dislocation across Punjab, Bengal, and Delhi. Through the demarcation of the Radcliffe Boundary Commission's intensified uncertainty, as archival evidence shows limited ground verification and inadequate coordination with local administrative structures. Despite transfer of power being ceremonially completed on 15 August 1947, intelligence reports and refugee rehabilitation files indicate an upsurge in unrest that severely disrupted the regions, i.e., police forces, revenue systems, and district administrations strained through communal breakdown. Scholars such as Bipan Chandra argument emphasized on independence being a decisive anti-colonial victory whereas Partition exposed deep structural contradictions within colonial state formation and communal politics(1999). Similarly, Ayesha Jalal highlights that the constitutional negotiations preceding 1947 which shaped the visions of sovereignty, which ultimately produced a divided outcome rather than a unified nation-state(1995). Official refugee rehabilitation reports demonstrate that the new governments of India and Pakistan faced immediate humanitarian crises, requiring emergency camps, military escorts, and adhoc administrative arrangements. Unlike a gradual constitutional evolution, transition in 1947, lacked complete institutional continuity, as British officers were replaced, services were reorganized, and assets were divided between the two Dominions. Although the Constituent Assembly of India proceeded to draft a republican constitution, early records show that governance depended heavily on inherited colonial administrative structures, particularly the civil services and district machinery. Thus, while 1947 marked formal sovereignty, which simultaneously generated fragmentation, displacement, and administrative strain, functioning both as moment of liberation and a crisis of state reconstruction.

Thus, both primary administrative records and secondary historiography indicate that the Revolt of 1857 faced significant structural constraints: fragmented leadership, limited communication networks, logistical inferiority, fiscal instability, and absence of an institutionalized alternative governance model and 1947 shaped profound structural challenges, including Partition induced displacement, communal violence, administrative division, refugee rehabilitation pressures, and the urgent task of institutional reconstruction. While the Revolt of

1857 exposed the vulnerabilities of Company rule and led to the Crown's direct takeover, it did not produce a durable administrative framework capable of sustaining sovereign authority. In contrast, the events of 1947 marked the formal end of colonial rule and the transfer of power to Indian leadership, but they simultaneously required the urgent construction of stable constitutional, bureaucratic, and security institutions to ensure the continuity and consolidation of sovereign governance.

## CONCLUSION

On comparison, 1857 and 1947 represent two structurally distinct yet interconnected moments in the longue durée of Indian political transformation. Both events, functioning not merely as chronological milestones, constituted crises of sovereignty that reconfigured the relationship between authority, legitimacy, and institutional order. The uprising of 1857 exposed the fragility of Company rule and precipitated the consolidation of imperial authority under the British Crown. Hence centralizing governance and redefining colonial statecraft. It was a moment of imperial reconstitution—an adjustment of power designed to stabilize and rationalize domination. Theoretically, these two turning points illustrate different modalities of historical change: 1857 as a crisis of imperial consolidation, and 1947 as a negotiated transfer of sovereignty. Together, they demonstrate that political turning points are not isolated events but moments in which power is reorganized, legitimized, and institutionalized. Their comparative analysis thus reveals how state formation in India unfolded through layered processes of rupture, adaptation, and continuity rather than linear progression.

Moreover, while 1947 marked the formal end of colonial sovereignty, it did not signify a complete institutional break. Administrative structures, bureaucratic hierarchies, and constitutional rationalities largely persisted, albeit reoriented toward democratic legitimacy. In this sense, independence represented both emancipation and inheritance. Similarly, the post-1857 settlement reorganized authority without dismantling the underlying logic of centralized governance. Viewed together, these crises illuminate sovereignty as a dynamic and contested process, continually reshaped through political struggle, constitutional negotiation, and institutional redesign within the evolving architecture of the Indian state. Ultimately, their comparative reading underscores that the Indian state emerged through negotiated transitions rather than abrupt discontinuities, embedding colonial legacies within a transformed democratic framework.

Furthermore, the longue durée perspective allows these events to be interpreted not as isolated ruptures but as nodes within a broader continuum of institutional evolution. Each moment triggered recalibrations in the balance between executive authority and representative aspiration, between centralization and accommodation, and between coercion and consent. In doing so, they generated new political vocabularies through which sovereignty was articulated, contested, and redefined. The enduring impact of these transformations is evident in the constitutional structure, bureaucratic ethos, and federal framework of postcolonial India, all of which reflect the layered sedimentation of historical experience. Thus, 1857 and 1947

collectively illuminate the dialectical processes through which authority is both challenged and reconstructed in the making of the modern Indian state.

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