

The Revolt of 1857 in Chhattisgarh: A Historical Analysis of Veer Narayan Singh's Resistance in Sonakhan

Dr. Abhishek Verma

Department of History, Rajeev Gandhi Govt PG College

Abstract

The Revolt of 1857 represents a defining moment in the history of India's anti-colonial struggle against British rule. While scholarly attention has predominantly focused on the major centres of rebellion such as Meerut, Delhi, Kanpur, and Jhansi, the contribution of regional resistance movements has remained comparatively underexplored. Among these regional struggles, the resistance led by Veer Narayan Singh, the zamindar of Sonakhan in present-day Chhattisgarh, occupies a significant position. His humanitarian intervention during the famine of 1856–1857, particularly the redistribution of food grains to starving peasants, challenged both colonial authority and the exploitative practices of local grain merchants. His subsequent arrest, escape from imprisonment, mobilization of local support, and armed resistance against the British administration transformed him into one of the earliest freedom fighters of central India.

Keywords: 1857 revolt, Veer Narayan Singh, Sonakhan, Chhattisgarh history, anti-colonial resistance, regional historiography

Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 occupies a central position in Indian historiography and is widely regarded as one of the earliest organized challenges to British colonial rule. Although historians have interpreted the uprising from diverse perspectives—as a sepoy mutiny, a civil rebellion, an agrarian movement, or the First War of Independence—it remains one of the most extensively debated events in modern Indian history. The dominant historical narrative has largely concentrated on the rebellion in northern India, emphasizing leaders such as Rani Lakshmibai, Nana Sahib, Bahadur Shah II, Tantia Tope, and Kunwar Singh. Consequently, the contributions of regional resistance movements in areas such as Chhattisgarh have received comparatively limited scholarly attention.

Among the regional leaders who emerged during this period, Veer Narayan Singh occupies a unique position in the historical memory of Chhattisgarh. As the zamindar of Sonakhan, he represented a form of leadership that combined humanitarian concern with political resistance against colonial exploitation. During the devastating famine of 1856–1857, widespread food scarcity and grain hoarding intensified the suffering of rural communities. Historical records and regional traditions suggest that Veer Narayan Singh distributed stored grain among starving villagers, an act interpreted by colonial authorities as defiance against the established

Published: 30 July 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i7.45856>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

legal and economic order. His arrest, subsequent escape, and organization of armed resistance reflected not only opposition to British authority but also a broader commitment to social justice and the welfare of his people.

The historical significance of Veer Narayan Singh extends beyond the immediate events of 1857. His movement demonstrates how local socio-economic grievances intersected with anti-colonial sentiments to produce a distinctive form of regional resistance. Unlike military leaders who relied primarily on trained soldiers, Veer Narayan Singh mobilized peasants, tribal communities, and local supporters whose participation reflected the broader social dimensions of colonial resistance. This perspective challenges the traditional historiography that often confines the Revolt of 1857 to military rebellion alone.

Despite his recognized status within Chhattisgarh, the contribution of Veer Narayan Singh remains relatively marginalized in national historical discourse. This imbalance highlights the need for greater scholarly attention to regional narratives that enrich the understanding of India's freedom movement. Contemporary historiography increasingly emphasizes the importance of integrating local histories into broader national frameworks, thereby recognizing the diverse experiences and motivations that shaped anti-colonial resistance across different regions of India.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the socio-economic and political conditions of Chhattisgarh before the Revolt of 1857.
2. To analyze the historical circumstances that led to the Sonakhan uprising.
3. To evaluate the contribution of Veer Narayan Singh to the anti-colonial resistance movement.
4. To assess the historiographical significance of regional resistance within the broader narrative of India's freedom struggle.
5. To identify the relevance of Veer Narayan Singh's legacy in contemporary historical scholarship.

Literature Review

The Revolt of 1857 has generated extensive historiographical debate among Indian and international scholars. Early colonial historians such as John William Kaye and George Bruce Malleson interpreted the uprising primarily as a military mutiny initiated by dissatisfied sepoys. Their accounts emphasized administrative failure and military indiscipline while minimizing the participation of peasants, tribal communities, and local leaders. Such interpretations have subsequently been criticized for overlooking the broader socio-political dimensions of the revolt.

Nationalist historians offered an alternative perspective by portraying the uprising as the First War of Indian Independence. Savarkar (1909) argued that the revolt represented a collective struggle against British colonialism involving soldiers, peasants, landlords, and traditional

rulers. Later historians, including S. N. Sen (1957) and S. B. Chaudhuri (1957), demonstrated that the movement possessed both military and civilian dimensions, thereby expanding the understanding of its geographical and social scope.

R. C. Majumdar (1957), however, presented a more cautious interpretation, arguing that the Revolt of 1857 lacked centralized leadership and a unified nationalist ideology. While acknowledging the significance of regional uprisings, he regarded the revolt as a series of localized movements rather than a coordinated national revolution. This interpretation has generated considerable scholarly debate regarding the nature and objectives of anti-colonial resistance in nineteenth-century India.

Recent historiography has increasingly emphasized regional perspectives. Scholars of subaltern and regional history argue that local resistance movements provide valuable insights into the diversity of colonial experiences across India. Within this framework, the contribution of Veer Narayan Singh has emerged as an important area of research in Chhattisgarh studies. Regional historians have highlighted his humanitarian response during the famine of 1856–1857, his opposition to exploitative grain traders, and his leadership in mobilizing local communities against colonial authority.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical research design based on secondary sources. Data were collected from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government gazetteers, archival records, and published historical documents related to the Revolt of 1857 and Veer Narayan Singh. The collected information was analyzed using the historical-analytical method to examine the socio-economic conditions, causes of the Sonakhan uprising, and the historical significance of Veer Narayan Singh's resistance. The study primarily relies on document analysis and comparative interpretation to provide a critical understanding of regional participation in the Revolt of 1857.

Scope and Limitations

The study focuses exclusively on the Sonakhan movement led by Veer Narayan Singh during 1856–1857. Since the research relies primarily on secondary sources, interpretations are limited by the availability and reliability of existing historical records.

Historical Background of Chhattisgarh before the Revolt of 1857

Prior to the Revolt of 1857, Chhattisgarh formed part of the Central Provinces under British administration. The region possessed a predominantly agrarian economy supported by forest resources and tribal livelihoods. Although geographically distant from the major administrative centres of British India, Chhattisgarh was increasingly integrated into the colonial revenue system during the nineteenth century.

British economic policies significantly altered traditional land relations. Increased revenue assessments, rigid taxation, and commercial exploitation placed considerable pressure upon cultivators and local zamindars. Simultaneously, traders and moneylenders gained greater

economic influence, often aggravating rural indebtedness. These structural transformations generated widespread dissatisfaction among peasants and tribal communities.

Veer Narayan Singh and the Sonakhan Resistance

Veer Narayan Singh, the zamindar of Sonakhan, occupies a distinguished place in the history of Chhattisgarh's resistance against British colonialism. Unlike several contemporary leaders whose movements were primarily military in character, his leadership originated from a humanitarian commitment to protecting the rural population during a period of acute famine.

Historical accounts indicate that in 1856–1857 severe food scarcity affected large sections of the population. Grain traders allegedly stored substantial quantities of food despite widespread starvation. Veer Narayan Singh intervened by facilitating the distribution of grain among famine-stricken villagers. Although his actions were viewed by local communities as an act of social justice, colonial authorities interpreted them as a violation of property rights and public order.

His arrest generated widespread resentment throughout the region. Assisted by local supporters, Veer Narayan Singh escaped imprisonment and organized resistance against British forces. The movement included peasants, tribal groups, and local followers who opposed colonial exploitation and administrative injustice.

Although British military superiority eventually suppressed the uprising, the resistance demonstrated the existence of organized anti-colonial sentiment within Chhattisgarh. Veer Narayan Singh was captured and publicly executed at Raipur on 10 December 1857. His execution was intended to discourage further rebellion; however, it instead transformed him into a symbol of sacrifice, courage, and regional identity.

Discussion

The Sonakhan uprising illustrates that the Revolt of 1857 cannot be understood solely through the experiences of northern India. Regional movements such as that led by Veer Narayan Singh reveal the complex interaction between famine, agrarian exploitation, colonial administration, and local political leadership.

Unlike conventional interpretations that emphasize military rebellion, the Sonakhan movement demonstrates the importance of humanitarian leadership in anti-colonial resistance. Veer Narayan Singh's decision to prioritize the survival of famine-stricken villagers gave his movement both moral legitimacy and popular support. His resistance therefore represented not only political opposition to colonial rule but also a struggle for social justice.

From a historiographical perspective, the limited attention given to Chhattisgarh in national histories reflects broader patterns of regional marginalization. Incorporating regional leaders such as Veer Narayan Singh into mainstream historical narratives contributes to a more balanced understanding of India's freedom struggle. His movement illustrates that anti-colonial resistance emerged through diverse regional experiences rather than a single uniform process.

Furthermore, the Sonakhan uprising highlights the relationship between economic exploitation and political resistance. Colonial revenue policies, food scarcity, and administrative

indifference collectively produced conditions that encouraged organized opposition. Consequently, Veer Narayan Singh should be understood not merely as a regional hero but as an important participant in the wider history of India's struggle against British colonialism.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that the contribution of Veer Narayan Singh to the Revolt of 1857 extends beyond the boundaries of regional history and deserves recognition within the broader narrative of India's anti-colonial movement. The historical evidence indicates that the Sonakhan uprising was shaped by multiple factors, including oppressive colonial revenue policies, agrarian distress, famine, and the growing dissatisfaction of rural communities. Veer Narayan Singh's humanitarian decision to distribute food grains to famine-stricken villagers transformed a local socio-economic crisis into a significant act of political resistance against British authority.

The analysis further reveals that the Sonakhan movement represented a distinctive form of anti-colonial struggle in which social justice, moral leadership, and popular participation were closely interconnected. Unlike many contemporary uprisings led primarily by military forces, this resistance reflected the collective aspirations of peasants, tribal communities, and local inhabitants who opposed colonial exploitation. Consequently, the movement provides valuable insight into the regional dimensions of the Revolt of 1857 and challenges interpretations that confine the uprising to a few major centres in northern India.

The study concludes that integrating regional leaders such as Veer Narayan Singh into mainstream historiography enriches the understanding of India's freedom struggle by highlighting its geographical diversity and socio-political complexity. Future research should incorporate archival documents, district records, oral traditions, and interdisciplinary approaches to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of the Sonakhan uprising and its enduring significance in Indian history.

References

- Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., Panikkar, K. N., Mahajan, S., & Mahajan, A. (2016). *India's struggle for independence (1857–1947)*. Penguin Random House India.
- Chaudhuri, S. B. (1957). *Civil rebellion in the Indian mutinies, 1857–1859*. World Press.
- Government of Chhattisgarh. (2015). *Chhattisgarh district gazetteer: Baloda Bazar–Bhatapara*. Directorate of Gazetteers.
- Government of India. (1957). *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*. Publications Division.
- Kaye, J. W., & Malleon, G. B. (1897). *History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58* (Vols. 1–6). W. H. Allen & Co.
- Majumdar, R. C. (1957). *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*. Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Mishra, D. P. (1983). *Madhya Pradesh mein swatantrata andolan*. Government of Madhya Pradesh.

- Raychaudhuri, T., Habib, I., & Kumar, D. (Eds.). (1983). *The Cambridge economic history of India* (Vol. 2). Cambridge University Press.
- Savarkar, V. D. (1909/2008). *The Indian War of Independence, 1857*. Lotus Press.
- Sen, S. N. (1957). *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*. Publications Division, Government of India.
- Sharma, R. K. (2015). *History of Chhattisgarh*. Concept Publishing Company.
- Singh, K. S. (Ed.). (1993). *People of India: Chhattisgarh*. Anthropological Survey of India.
- Sarkar, S. (1983). *Modern India: 1885–1947*. Macmillan India.
- Tripathi, A. R. (1967). *History of Kanauj to the Muslim conquest*. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Government of Chhattisgarh. (2022). *Veer Narayan Singh: Life and contribution to the freedom movement*. Department of Culture, Government of Chhattisgarh.