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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

War Against British Colonialism Began Long Before 1857

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War Against British Colonialism Began Long Before 1857

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EDITORIAL SUMMARY

The Hindustan Times editorial (published to mark the **169th anniversary of the 1857 Revolt**) argues that India’s anti-colonial struggle began long before 1857 — with diverse regional uprisings led by peasants, tribal communities, and local rulers across the subcontinent. It critiques the historiographical overemphasis on 1857 as the singular “**First War of Independence**” — a framing popularised by V.D. Savarkar in 1909 — arguing that this obscures the **hundreds of earlier revolts** that exposed colonial exploitation and laid the cultural and political groundwork for later nationalism.

The editorial highlights that the pre-1857 movements, though geographically fragmented and locally isolated, were genuine anti-colonial assertions — not mere provincial disturbances. They drew on shared grievances: land dispossession, revenue extraction, disruption of traditional economies, and the delegitimisation of local authority structures.

1857 REVOLT — STANDARD HISTORICAL CONTEXT

FEATURE	DETAIL
Common names	Sepoy Mutiny (British colonial term); First War of Independence (nationalist framing)
Date	May 10, 1857 — sepoys at Meerut cantonment; spread across North India
Immediate trigger	Enfield rifle greased cartridges (beef/pork tallow — offensive to both Hindu and Muslim soldiers)
Leaders	Mangal Pandey (Barrackpore), Rani Laxmibai (Jhansi), Tantia Tope, Begum Hazrat Mahal, Nana Sahib
British response	Brutal suppression; formal transfer of power from East India Company to British Crown
End	1858 — Government of India Act 1858 transfers rule to British Crown; Queen Victoria’s Proclamation
Key outcome	Abolition of EIC rule; formal British Raj begins; Army restructured to prevent recurrence

THE HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATE — WAS 1857 TRULY THE “FIRST”?

FRAMING	SOURCE	CORE ARGUMENT
“Sepoy Mutiny”	British colonial historiography	A localised military mutiny — no shared political goal; not a national movement
“First War of Independence”	V.D. Savarkar , <i>The Indian War of Independence of 1857</i> (1909, Netherlands)	Organised, nationwide rebellion against foreign rule — the book was pre-emptively banned by the British before its Marathi publication; English edition banned in India until 1946 ; copies smuggled in with false covers (e.g., <i>The Pickwick Papers</i> , <i>Don Quixote</i> , <i>Scott’s Works</i>)
“Neither First, nor National, nor a War of Independence”	R.C. Majumdar , <i>The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857</i> (1957)	The revolt was not the first (earlier uprisings existed), not national in scope (large parts uninvolved), and not a planned war of independence — rejects both British and nationalist framings
Subaltern Studies approach	Ranajit Guha , <i>Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India</i> (1983)	Analyses 110 peasant insurgencies (1783–1900); pre-1857 revolts demonstrate structured subaltern anti-colonial agency — not “spontaneous disorder” as colonial records claimed

R.C. Majumdar’s exact phrase — “neither the First, nor National, nor a War of Independence” — is a frequently tested quote in GS1 Mains and Prelims.

PRE-1857 UPRISINGS — DETAILED ANALYSIS

South India

REVOLT (PERIOD)	LEADER(S)	KEY FACTS
Polygar Wars (1799–1805)	Veerapandya Kattabomman (First Polygar War)	Tamil Nadu Poligars (Palaiyakkarars — hereditary military governors) resisted British suzerainty; Kattabomman hanged on 16 October 1799 at Kayathar (Thoothukudi district) — captured with help from Pudukottai ruler; two Polygar Wars (1799; 1800–1805) ended with British annexation under Carnatic Treaty (July 31, 1801)
Vellore Mutiny (10 July 1806)	Tipu Sultan's sons (held at Vellore Fort); Indian sepoy of Madras Army	Immediate trigger: November 1805 dress code orders — Hindus prohibited from wearing tilak on duty; Muslims required to shave beards; Tipu's sons were confined at Vellore Fort since 1799; British commander Colonel St. John Fancourt killed; ~130 British soldiers killed/wounded; suppressed by cavalry from Arcot under Captain Robert Rollo Gillespie ; ~350 mutineers killed including ~100 in summary executions
Velu Thampi's Revolt (1808–09)	Velu Thampi Dalawa (Prime Minister of Travancore)	Resisted British interference in Travancore's internal affairs; issued the Kundara Proclamation on 11 January 1809 at Kundara (Kollam district, Kerala); died by suicide with his dagger at the Mannadi Bhagavathy temple when surrounded by British forces; never surrendered
Kittur Revolt (October 1824)	Rani Chennamma (Karnataka)	Refused to accept the Company's rejection of adopted heir Shivalingappa ; pre-figured the Doctrine of Lapse (formally codified by Dalhousie from 1848 — 24 years later); British Collector St. John Thackeray killed by Amatur Balappa; Rani captured and imprisoned at Bailhongal Fort (Belagavi district); died in captivity 21 February 1829

Bengal, Odisha, and Bihar

REVOLT (PERIOD)	LEADER(S)	KEY FACTS
Sanyasi & Fakir Revolt (1763–1800)	Majnu Shah (Fakirs); Bhawani Pathak and Debi Chaudhurani (Sanyasis)	Displaced peasants and wandering ascetics against EIC's disruption of traditional economies; Bankim Chandra's novel Anandamath (1882) is set in this milieu – contains Vande Mataram (first published here); his Devi Chaudhurani (1884) fictionalises Debi Chaudhurani's role
Paika Rebellion, Odisha (29 March 1817)	Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhara Mohapatra Bhramarbara Raya (Buxi Jagabandhu)	Paikas were peasant militias of Odisha's Gajapati rulers – held nishkar (revenue-free) land in exchange for military service; British abolished this system; revolt spread from Khurda across Odisha; Jagabandhu surrendered (1825) and died as British prisoner in Cuttack (1829); Parliament 2021 declined "First War" label but included it in NCERT Class VIII
Wahabi Movement (1820s–1870s)	Syed Ahmad Barelvi (NW frontier); Titu Mir (Bengal)	Dual character: Islamic reformist + anti-colonial; Titu Mir's bamboo fort at Narkelberia (Barasat district, Bengal, 1831) symbolised rural resistance; Titu Mir killed when British artillery destroyed the fort, November 1831

Tribal and Peasant Revolts

REVOLT (PERIOD)	COMMUNITY	KEY FACTS
Bhil Revolt (1818–1831)	Bhil tribe – Khandesh, Maharashtra	Against displacement by British territorial expansion; Bhils used guerrilla tactics in the Satpura and Vindhya hills
Kol Uprising (1831–32)	Mundas, Oraons, Hos, Bhumijis – Chota Nagpur plateau, Jharkhand	Against land alienation under new British tenure laws and influx of Diku (outsider moneylenders/merchants); centred in Ranchi–Singhbhum; key leader Budhu Bhagat (Silagai, Ranchi) killed 13 February 1832 ; suppressed by Thomas Wilkinson
Santhal Hul (30 June 1855)	Sidhu, Kanhu, Chand, Bhairav Murmu (four brothers); sisters Phoolo and Jhano Murmu	~10,000 Santhals gathered at Bhognadih , Sahibganj district (now Jharkhand); against mahajans, zamindars, and British traders exploiting Damin-i-Koh; British reprisal killed ~ 15,000–20,000 Santhals ; 10,000+ villages destroyed; Sidhu hanged 9 August 1855 ; Kanhu executed February 1856

The Santhal Hul began just **2 years before 1857** and is far less prominent in mainstream historical consciousness despite its scale. The six leaders include **four brothers and two sisters** — a detail frequently tested in Prelims.

COMMON GRIEVANCES ACROSS PRE-1857 MOVEMENTS

The editorial emphasises that these uprisings, despite their geographical and communal diversity, shared structural causes rooted in British colonial policy:

GRIEVANCE	MECHANISM	AFFECTED GROUPS
Land dispossession	Permanent Settlement (1793); Ryotwari; abolition of nishkar/inam lands	Peasants, tribal cultivators, Paikas
Revenue extraction	Fixed cash demands regardless of harvest; no customary remissions	All peasant communities
Trade monopoly	EIC's trade monopolies disrupted artisanal and itinerant economies	Sanyasis, Fakirs, weavers
Delegitimisation of local rulers	Subsidiary Alliance; Doctrine of Lapse; annexation	Polygar chiefs, Kittur, Travancore
Cultural/religious intervention	Dress codes, missionary activity, new legal systems	Military sepoys, Muslim communities, tribal communities

CULTURAL MEMORY — LITERATURE AND RESISTANCE

WORK (YEAR)	AUTHOR	CONNECTION
Anandamath (1882)	Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay	Novel set in Sanyasi Revolt era; contains Vande Mataram (became India's national song); shaped nationalist consciousness
Devi Chaudhurani (1884)	Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay	Novel fictionalising Debi Chaudhurani's role in Sanyasi-Fakir resistance
<i>The Indian War of Independence of 1857</i> (1909)	V.D. Savarkar	First nationalist historiography of 1857; banned before publication; copies smuggled in false covers
<i>The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857</i> (1957)	R.C. Majumdar	Academic counter to both colonial and nationalist framings
<i>Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency</i> (1983)	Ranajit Guha	Foundational Subaltern Studies text; recovers peasant/tribal agency across 110 insurgencies, 1783–1900

WHY THE DISTORTION HAPPENED — THE EDITORIAL'S ARGUMENT

The HT editorial argues that the historiographical overemphasis on 1857 occurred for layered reasons:

- ❶ **Colonial convenience:** British historians needed to frame 1857 as an isolated military mutiny to deny its political character — this narrative also minimised the earlier revolts.
- ❷ **Nationalist consolidation:** Indian nationalist historiographers, needing a singular founding moment for anti-colonial consciousness, elevated 1857 as the symbolic origin — which inadvertently erased the preceding century of resistance.
- ❸ **Elite bias:** Both colonial and early nationalist history focused on leaders, armies, and courts — not peasants and tribals. Pre-1857 revolts were peasant and tribal; they lacked the drama of Mughal-era princes and European-trained soldiers.
- ❹ **Regional isolation:** Movements in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Odisha, and Jharkhand did not connect with each other — a fact colonial administrators exploited and later used to deny their collective significance.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS1 – Modern History	Pre-1857 uprisings, 1857 Revolt, tribal revolts, peasant movements, colonial land policies
GS1 – History	Historiographical debate – “First War of Independence”; Subaltern Studies vs nationalist history
GS1 – Art & Culture	Anandamath and Vande Mataram; Bankim Chandra; cultural memory of resistance
GS2 – Governance	Federalism angle: how regional histories are incorporated (or not) into national historical narrative; NCERT curriculum decisions

Mains Keywords: 1857 Revolt, First War of Independence, V.D. Savarkar, Polygar Wars, Veerapandya Kattabomman, Vellore Mutiny, Velu Thampi Kundara Proclamation, Kittur Rani Chennamma, Doctrine of Lapse, Paika Rebellion, Bakshi Jagabandhu, Santhal Hul, Sidhu Kanhu Murmu, Kol Uprising, Sanyasi Revolt, Anandamath, Subaltern Studies, Ranajit Guha, R.C. Majumdar, colonial resistance, EIC

Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
1857 trigger	Enfield rifle greased cartridges; Meerut, May 10, 1857
Govt of India Act 1858	Transferred power from EIC to British Crown; Queen Victoria's Proclamation
Savarkar's book	<i>The Indian War of Independence of 1857</i> (1909); pre-emptively banned; copies smuggled in false dust jackets; English ban lifted 1946
R.C. Majumdar quote	"Neither the First, nor National, nor a War of Independence"
Ranajit Guha	<i>Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency</i> (1983); 110 insurgencies, 1783–1900
Kattabomman	Hanged 16 October 1799 at Kayathar , Thoothukudi district, Tamil Nadu
Vellore Mutiny	10 July 1806 ; Col. St. John Fancourt killed; ~130 British casualties; suppressed by Gillespie from Arcot
Velu Thampi	Dalawa of Travancore; Kundara Proclamation: 11 January 1809 ; died by suicide (not in battle)
Kittur Rani Chennamma	October 1824 ; St. John Thackeray (Collector) killed; imprisoned at Bailhongal Fort ; died 21 February 1829
Doctrine of Lapse	Formalised by Dalhousie from 1848 — Kittur case (1824) preceded it by 24 years
Paika Rebellion	29 March 1817 ; Odisha; Bakshi Jagabandhu Bidyadhara Mohapatra Bhramarbara Raya ; Jagabandhu died in captivity, Cuttack, 1829
Wahabi Movement	Syed Ahmad Bareilvi (NW); Titu Mir's bamboo fort at Narkelberia , Bengal, 1831
Kol Uprising	1831–32 ; Mundas + Oraons + Hos + Bhumijis; Chota Nagpur; Budhu Bhagat killed 13 Feb 1832
Santhal Hul	30 June 1855 ; Bhognadih, Sahibganj; Sidhu + Kanhu + Chand + Bhairav Murmu + Phoolo + Jhano Murmu (six leaders); ~15,000–20,000 Santhals killed; Sidhu hanged 9 Aug 1855
Anandamath	Bankim Chandra, 1882 ; based on Sanyasi Revolt; contains Vande Mataram
Sanyasi Revolt period	1763–1800 ; Bengal; Majnu Shah (Fakirs), Bhawani Pathak (Sanyasis)

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