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The Great Mutiny: Rifles, Religion, and Grease
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The year 2007 marks the 150th anniversary of the Great Mutiny of 1857 in India. This rebellion, sometimes called the First Indian War of Independence, was an attempt by the Indians to rid the country of British control. Instead, defeat brought direct rule by London and incorporation into the British Empire. India did not win its freedom until after World War II.

The Mutiny was ignited by the introduction of the Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle to the native troops serving British in India. If this weapon was the spark, then the tinder that flamed into the rebellion were the religious sensibilities of the Hindu and Muslim soldiers, who disliked not the weapon, but the negative impact on their religious status using it would bring.

Prior to 1857, much of India had been taken over by the aggressive tactics of the British East India Trading Company. The British government had sent a few troops to India, ostensibly to protect the company, but in reality, to assist in subjugating India.

These troops served primarily as officers for an army consisting of native Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu soldiers were almost exclusively high-caste Brahmins, whose religious status required them to maintain strict rules of ritual purity. The Muslim soldiers were rajputs, which refers to an elite warrior class who had, over the centuries, served the Islamic Delhi Sultanates, the Mughal Empire and the British.

The religious status of these two groups served the British well; it provided strong unit cohesion and made them a coordinated fighting force. But when friction appeared between the groups and their officers, that cohesion worked against the commanders.

Friction was mounting by the 1850s. Pay increases fell well behind inflation and bonus pay dried up. While in previous decades the British had encouraged soldiers' religious identity as a means of securing loyalty, now many Christian officers were preaching Christianity to them and calling for conversion. This was seen as insulting and disrespectful, and caused the troops to distrust their officers' motives.

The introduction of the Enfield 1853 rifled musket tipped the soldiers into open rebellion. Like its predecessor, the Baker Rifle, the Enfield was loaded through the gun's muzzle. Unlike its predecessor, it was fired by a percussion cap, which enabled it to be fired in all weather, even India's monsoon rains.

The problem lay in the cartridges used to load it. The Enfield still used paper cartridges containing powder and the shot ball. To load it, the rifleman would bite off the cartridge top, pour the powder down the muzzle, put in the paper, and then the shot, tapping it all down to the bottom.

In 1857, the barracks were rampant with rumors. Among the Muslims, the rumor was that the cartridge was sealed with pig grease. Since Muslims were forbidden to consume pork of any kind, the act of loading the weapon would cause these elite troops, all serious Muslims, to transgress this important religious law. Among the Hindu Brahmins, the rumor was that the cartridges were sealed with lard, grease made from the fat of cattle. Not only were cattle sacred to Hindus, but consuming their meat products would render the Brahmin soldiers ritually impure.

The British repeatedly denied the rumors, even suggesting that the soldiers remake the cartridges with a neutral sealant such as beeswax. In the soldiers' mind, this proposal simply confirmed the rumors. They were certain that the greased cartridges were a British plot to render them impure and thus separate them from their families and communities. This would, the reasoning went, make them more vulnerable to Christian missionizing.

In the end, the officers had little patience with their soldiers' concerns. All they could see was a refusal to use the new weapons technology. When officers forced the matter, troops at several forts rebelled, firing on the officers and refusing to take orders. The mutiny spread and it became a general rebellion. When finally put down a year later, the British Raj had come to stay.

The Great Mutiny had several causes, but British insensitivity to and disrespect of Hinduism and Islam sparked the rebellion. The soldiers objected not to the new gun itself, but to the religious transgression that biting its paper cartridges would cause.