



Modern Indian History Series

1857 Revolt : Meerut, Delhi and Bareilly

Events and Progress | Modern Indian History | UPSC

Meerut Uprising | Fall of Delhi | Bakht Khan | Bahadur Shah Zafar | Siege & Recapture

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The Meerut Uprising

How a public humiliation on 9 May 1857 triggered the revolt the very next day

1. The Atmosphere Before Meerut

After Mangal Pandey's execution (8 April 1857), the 34th BNI was **disbanded with disgrace on 6 May 1857** — a public humiliation meant to scare every unit into submission. But fear does not always create loyalty; sometimes it creates anger that waits.

Cantonments became tense. Soldiers discussed cartridges, religion, punishments, and dignity. The feeling spread: today one regiment, tomorrow theirs.

2. The Humiliation at Meerut (9 May 1857)

85 men of the **3rd Bengal Light Cavalry** had refused cartridges during drills and were court-martialled. On 9 May, the entire garrison was paraded. The condemned men were **stripped of uniforms and put in irons** before their comrades. Most received **10 years' imprisonment with hard labour**.

It was meant to break their spirit in public. Instead, it broke the remaining trust in the system.

3. The Outbreak (10 May 1857)

By late afternoon on 10 May, mutiny erupted in the cantonment — starting in the native infantry lines,

spreading to the cavalry, then spilling into the city. Ordinary townspeople and villagers joined the sepoys.

Action at Meerut	
Jail	Broken open; all jailed comrades freed
Bell of Arms	Seized; weapons and ammunition taken
British Officers	Attacked; bungalows ransacked and burned
Govt Buildings	Record office, jail, court, post office, treasury — destroyed and plundered
Telegraph Line	Cut to Delhi — so warning cannot travel fast

That night, a group of sepoys rode out from Meerut towards **Delhi** — in their minds, Delhi meant legitimacy, the flag, and the crown.

The Capture of Delhi

How rebels seized Delhi, claimed Mughal authority, and tried to govern

4. Rebels Enter Delhi (11 May 1857)

Early morning on 11 May, rebel cavalry reached Delhi and entered through the **Rajghat Gate** before Company officials could close the gates. Local crowds joined them instantly. British officers and civilians were attacked. **Company control inside Delhi collapsed in hours.**

At the **Main Guard near Kashmiri Gate**, Company officers tried to take shelter, but sepoys posted there also turned rebel — those officers were killed. Many Europeans in Delhi were attacked. Surviving British families fled to the northern edge.

5. Bahadur Shah Zafar's Reluctant Leadership

Rebels pressed straight to the **Red Fort**, demanding the last Mughal Emperor accept their leadership. A revolt with a king's name becomes a **claim to power**, not just a riot.

Zafar hesitated — old and scared, he said he had no money or means to maintain an army. But the sepoys would not leave. Under pressure, he accepted **nominal leadership around 12 May**. He became a **symbol, not a commander** — orders moved in his name, but control remained loose.

6. Rebel Proclamations & Unity Appeals

The rebellion began to speak like a state. Written orders, **proclamations (ishtahars)** were posted in the city, calling on **Hindus and Muslims to unite**.

AZAMGARH PROCLAMATION (25 Aug 1857)

A full manifesto addressing Hindus and Muslims together. It attacked: heavy revenue demands on zamindars, squeezing of merchants, job discrimination (Indians kept low, Englishmen on top), and ruin of artisans from imported goods. Promised a **Badshahi order** to correct these wrongs.

English translation published in **Delhi Gazette, 29 Sep 1857**.

One well-known appeal urged people to fight under the standards of both Muhammad and Mahavir — so the British cannot break unity by religion.

7. Delhi's Core Weakness: Fire Without a Steering Wheel

From day one, there was **no single command**. Different sepoy units acted independently. Decisions were slow, discipline uneven. A revolt can start with emotion, but a **war needs a system**. Zafar was surrounded by pressure from soldiers and palace politics. It was like a storm without a compass.

Bakht Khan & Bareilly

How a professional soldier tried to give the revolt a command structure

8. Bakht Khan — The Soldier's Commander

Bakht Khan was not a royal man but a **professional soldier** with ~40 years' experience in Company artillery. He understood how armies actually work. Watching Delhi's disorganisation from Bareilly, he marched with a large force and artillery, reaching **Delhi on 1 July 1857**.

He pushed for a "**Court of Administration**" — 10 members (6 military, 4 civilian), a mix of Hindu and Muslim leaders to run Delhi in the Emperor's name like a government, not scattered groups.

THE INTERNAL TRAGEDY: Bakht Khan tried to create central command but faced resistance from all sides — some sepoy units wouldn't follow him, palace nobles created suspicion, and Zafar didn't fully trust a soldier who spoke bluntly. He was **fighting a war outside and politics inside** simultaneously.

9. The British Siege & Fall of Delhi

Meanwhile, the British regrouped. After the battle at **Badli-ki-Serai (8 June 1857)**, they took **Delhi Ridge** and began a long siege from that high ground. The British had one clear chain of command, discipline, central planning, and heavy guns — fighting like a machine against many brave but uncoordinated rebel fires.

Date	Event
8 Jun 1857	Battle of Badli-ki-Serai; British take Delhi Ridge
8 Sep 1857	Heavy bombardment of Delhi walls begins
14 Sep 1857	British storm through breaches; John Nicholson leads assault, badly wounded
14–20 Sep	Street-by-street fighting; rebels pushed back daily
20 Sep 1857	Zafar leaves Red Fort, takes shelter at Humayun's Tomb
21 Sep 1857	Delhi declared captured ; Zafar taken into custody
22 Sep 1857	Three Mughal princes shot at Khooni Darwaza — Mughal line extinguished
23 Sep 1857	John Nicholson dies of his wounds

10. British Retribution

After 21 September, Delhi was treated as a **warning, not a normal captured city**. Summary executions, mass retaliation, homes searched, property seized, loot carried away. Bodies left on roads for days. The message: **“This is what happens if you rise.”**

THE COMPLETE PICTURE

Delhi's fall was not just the end of a siege — it was the end of a symbol. The **Mughal line was extinguished**. The rebels lost their centre. British control returned through **force and fear**.

The rebel weakness from day one: **fire without a steering wheel**. Courage without unified command. Bakht Khan tried to fix it, but palace politics and divided loyalties proved too deep.

British take Delhi Ridge (8 Jun). Bombardment from 8 Sep. Storm on 14 Sep (Nicholson wounded). Street fighting 14–20 Sep. Delhi captured 21 Sep. Zafar arrested. Princes shot at Khooni Darwaza.

British Retribution

Delhi punished as a warning. Summary executions, mass retaliation, property seized. Mughal line extinguished. British control restored through force and fear.

SUMMARY

Quick Revision — All Key Points

Meerut (9–10 May 1857)

85 cavalrymen court-martialled and publicly humiliated on 9 May. Next day, mutiny erupts — jail broken, weapons seized, buildings destroyed, telegraph cut. Sepoys march to Delhi overnight.

Delhi Captured (11–12 May)

Rebels enter through Rajghat Gate. Company control collapses in hours. Sepoys at Kashmiri Gate Main Guard also turn rebel. Bahadur Shah Zafar accepts nominal leadership under pressure.

Proclamations & Unity

Ishtahars call on Hindus and Muslims to unite. Azamgarh Proclamation (25 Aug) — a full manifesto attacking revenue, job discrimination, and ruin of artisans. Published in Delhi Gazette.

Bakht Khan & Bareilly

Professional soldier, ~40 years' experience. Reached Delhi 1 July with artillery. Set up Court of Administration (10 members: 6 military, 4 civilian). Faced resistance from court and rebels.

Delhi's Core Weakness

No single command from day one. Zafar was symbol, not commander. Different units acted independently. Bakht Khan tried to fix it but palace politics blocked him.

Siege & Fall of Delhi



The Core Takeaway

The revolt had **fire but no steering wheel**. Meerut showed the anger. Delhi gave it a symbol. Bakht Khan tried to give it a system.

But without **unified command**, the rebels could not hold what they captured. The British fought as a machine — one chain of command, discipline, heavy guns. Delhi's fall on **21 September 1857** ended the revolt's centre and extinguished the Mughal line forever.

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Episode 5: The Revolt Across India — Kanpur, Lucknow & Beyond

How the revolt spread to other centres, who led the resistance, and how the British suppressed it region by region.