

Resurrecting India's Struggle for Independence: Pioneering Role of Babu Jagat Singh

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Abstract

Based on a five-year project (2019-2023) that investigated colonial correspondences and records held in various archives, a research document has been prepared to re-investigate the colonial history of the Banaras estate. Pradeep Narayan Singh, the representative of the Royal Family, has patronised this project through a significant grant and infrastructure. Over time, the report has been published as a research monograph, considering the role and activities of 'Babu' Jagat Singh, a member of the Royal Family of Banaras, who in the 18th Century led the group of revolutionaries and also led the first exploration of the Buddhist site of Sarnath; however, erroneously he was projected as a destroyer. This research has dispelled the earlier misconceptions about him, as supplemented by authentic archival sources.

Keywords: Banaras (Varanasi); Colonial History; Jagat Singh; Jagatganj; Royal Family; Sarnath

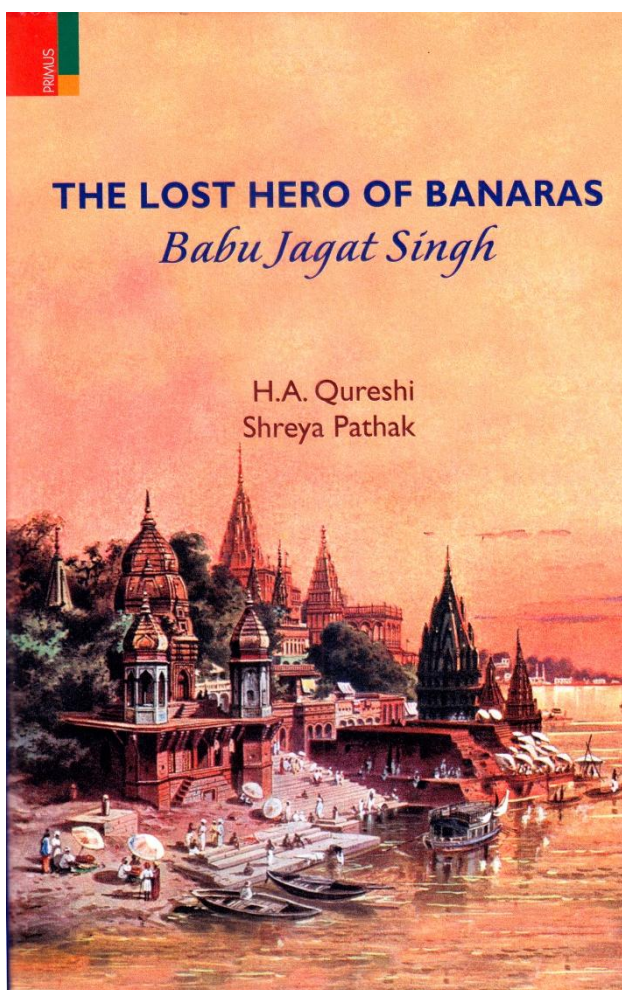
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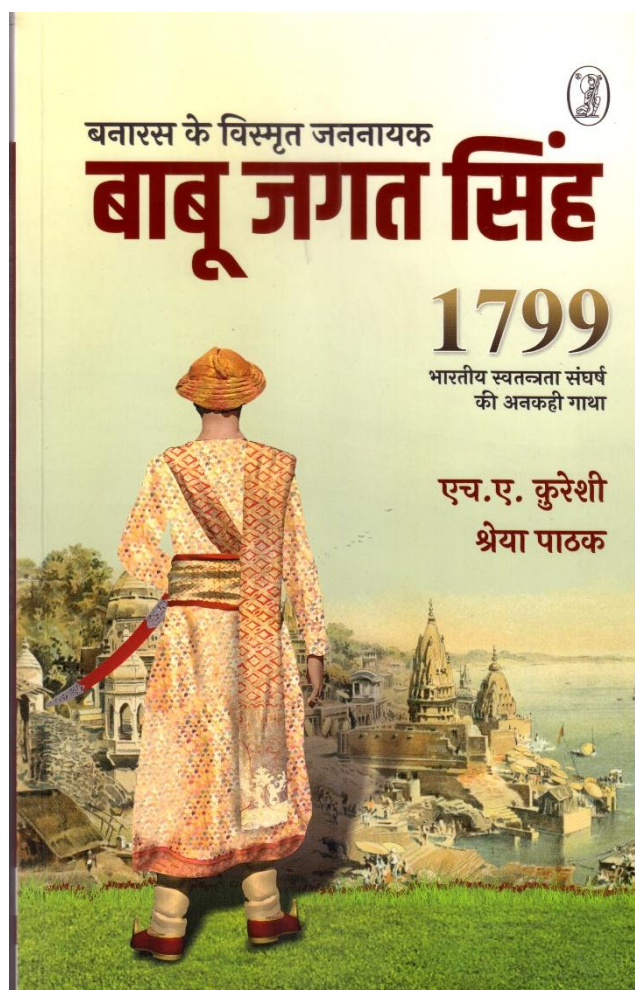
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Introduction



Hamid Afaq Qureshi, and Shreya Pathak (2024a). *The Lost Hero of Banaras, Babu Jagat Singh*. Royal 8vo. Hbk ISBN: 978-93-5852-531-1, PoD: 978-93-5852-243-3. © Pradeep Narayan Singh. Primus Books, an Imprint of Ratna Sagar P. Ltd, Delhi. INR 1195



Hamid Afaq Qureshi, and Shreya Pathak (2024b). *The Lost Hero of Banaras, Babu Jagat Singh (1799: The Untold Story of India's Struggle for Independence)*; in Hindi. Translated by Shan Kashyap. Royal 8vo. Pbk ISBN: 978-93-6287-567-9. © Pradeep Narayan Singh. Vani Prakashan, New Delhi. INR 795.

There has been little attempt to analyse the civil disturbances during the British rule in India (1765–1857); in fact, more emphasis is laid on the Mutiny and post-Mutiny periods. The first pioneering attempt was by Chaudhuri (1955: xxiii), who remarked, “[o]n the purely historical side, there are some stray contributions of great value, dealing with local resistance in the different parts of this vast country; but they have ignored the basic unity of anti-British tendencies, ranging from Singapore to Peshawar and from Kandi to Bareilly.” Of course, Smith (1919:713) mentioned, “[i]t is equally certain that the minds of the civil population of all classes and ranks, Hindus and Muhammadans,

princes and people, were agitated and disturbed by feelings of uneasiness and vague apprehension. The disturbance of sentiment was not manifested by insurrections, as the discontent of the army had been signalled by mutinies.” Chaudhuri’s work has covered a broad spectrum of regional conditions, but the case of the Banaras estate was marginalised. Over time, two books based on doctoral dissertations have been published that examine the colonial history of the Banaras region. Mishra’s (1975) book discussed a socio-economic study of Banaras from 1738 to 1795, and Pathak (2014) examined the rise and development of the ruling dynasty of Banaras

State from 1740 to 1950. Both works missed out on discussing civil disturbances and the spark of revolution initiated by 'Babu' Jagat Singh. In 1775, the British took control of Banaras State through an agreement. As a result, an environment of civil disobedience was created. This issue has drawn the attention of several scholars, but the crucial roles of Jagat Singh and Wazir Ali have been neglected. The book under review is a pioneering effort in this context, paving the way to understand the historical fallacy.

The present books are an outcome of the Jagat Singh Royal Family Project (JSRFP), which was initiated on 20 April 2019 under the umbrella of a Working Committee consisting of five persons, patronised by Pradeep Narayan Singh [b. 20 February 1962–], the representative of the Royal Family and patron of this project. This project was completed, and Shreya Pathak submitted a comprehensive report comprising seven chapters on 1 June 2023. Over the following four months (July–October), the manuscript was revised and updated by H.A. Qureshi using pertinent archival and Persian sources. The book (2024a) was released on 14 December 2023. Simultaneously, the English draft was translated into Hindi, with additions, elaborations, and substantiations of the discussion incorporating more archival evidence (2024b; released on 20 August 2024). The books examine the life and legacy of Babu Jagat Singh, a scion of the royal family of Banaras and an instrumental figure in Indian history during the late 18th and early 19th centuries in India. Most historiographies of the period tend to think of 1857 as a watershed moment in India's struggle for independence. However, the present book, set during a period when the sovereignty of zamindars in north India was rapidly dwindling due to increasing colonial intervention, focuses on an armed anti-British struggle in Banaras in 1799, pioneered under the auspices of Jagat Singh. Babu Jagat Singh, who respected all faiths, proved his commitment when he provided land for a Gurdwara and even constructed a mosque near Jagatganj in 1791, which remains extant. Hence, a stone tablet in Jagatganj refers to Jagat Singh as a person highly respected and regarded by people from all walks

of life. 'Babu' Jagat Singh was the fourth son of Shival Singh and grandson of Dasaram and was then looking after the administration of Shivpur (which included Sarnath) and Katehar *parganas* (Qureshi & Pathak 2024a: 94; Qureshi & Pathak 2024b: 104).

Coverage

The books under review are remarkable portrayals of Babu Jagat Singh, a multi-faceted personality and a member of the Royal family of Banaras, who is and will always be remembered as a pivotal figure because he, along with Wazir Ali, offered resistance to the rising power of the East India Company, which acquired the Banaras state in 1775 (Mishra 1975: 24). Jagat Singh also became a source of inspiration for posterity due to his boldness, indomitable courage, and strategic acumen. The subject matter is arranged into seven chapters covering the Origin of the Raj, Jagat Singh: Constructing and Edging Forward, Exploring the Unexplored: Probing the Sarnath Discovery, The Succession of the *Raj: Claim, Controversy, Deviation, Throning and Dethroning: Engineering Conflicts and Conspiracies, Jagat Singh and Anti-Colonial Resistance: Role, Responses, Repression; and The Trajectory of the Decline: Suppression, Apprehension, and Trial*, and at the end an Epilogue that presents a concise narration of the whole book. The Hindi translation also consists of additional sources that were consulted and collated during January–June 2024 (Qureshi & Pathak 2024b: 244–304), and appendices referring to the list of persons trailed in the Banaras Court who were charged against civil disturbances, the list of British documents charging against Jagat Singh, the petition in Persian, the bibliography of all the original documents from the British Library and Museum, Indian archives at New Delhi, State Archive of West Bengal at Calcutta (Kolkata), Regional Archives at Prayagraj (Allahabad) and Varanasi.

Further, the books also give interesting details of Jagat Singh's trial at the Special Court of Banaras, where it was proclaimed on 22 July 1799 that his crime was tantamount to a 'death sentence', but as the death sentence was not within the

jurisdiction of the Special Court, his case was referred to Sadar Nizamat Adalat, Calcutta. Thus, Jagat Singh was sent from Banaras to Chunar Fort and finally to Fort William, Calcutta. The Sadar Nizamat Adalat, in concurrence with the Governor-General-in-Council, commuted his death sentence to life imprisonment, as he was a 'Brahmin'. In fact, the British Government felt so much threatened and apprehensive of Jagat Singh's popularity, competence and resourcefulness that they dared not confine him in any place within the Indian Peninsula. Lord Wellesley, the Governor-General-in-Council, therefore, was of the opinion that the convict was to be interned in a far-off South Atlantic Ocean Island, St. Helena Island, away 7164 nautical miles (13,268 kilometres), from where there was a very remote chance for the prisoner to watch the Sunrises of his motherland 'Bhārat'. Sixteen years later, a renowned hero of France, Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte [1769 – 1821], was sent into exile on this island after his defeat in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1815. Of course, in the public sphere, he was hailed as the first revolutionary against the British.

It seems that, considering his high status, Jagat Singh was never put under fetters. That was why, on 20 October 1799, it became easy for Jagat Singh to jump into the river Hooghly, a tributary of the Ganga, while he was being taken out of Fort William to board a boat that would take him to Osterley—the English ship, which was anchored on the high seas, to proceed towards St. Helena Island (Qureshi & Pathak 2024a: 215; Qureshi & Pathak 2024b: 207; MDP, 1799). Seeing him jump into the river to take his ultimate '*Jalasamādhi*' (a ritual death through water immersion), the English guards remained thunderstruck with awe. This incident throws ample light on Jagat Singh's strong, pious character, his high values and extraordinary love for his motherland. He preferred death to leaving his country for an alien destination.

Contesting the existing knowledge based on primary evidence, this work demonstrates that Babu Jagat Singh was also responsible for discovering the ancient sacred site of the Dharmarajika Stupa at Sarnath in the vicinity of

Banaras city. However, the credit has been erroneously and maliciously ascribed to Alexander Cunningham [1814-1893] in colonial historiography. Jagat Singh took a great interest in Persian literature while also respecting and providing places of worship for all communities (Qureshi & Pathak 2024a: 86; Qureshi & Pathak 2024b: 98). The books, thus, depart from the established colonial historiography and provide a retelling of the lives of the royalty who have been hitherto forgotten or deliberately marginalised.

The period from 1707 to 1857 was a highly crucial time in India's history. The advent of the Europeans (through the East India Company) for trading later led to territorial ennoblement by the British, who ruled over the sub-continent for over two hundred years (1765 to 1947). The English exploited the country, both politically and economically, and deteriorated its cultural sensibility at their own will and benefit. Resultantly, some discontented and bold persons like Babu Jagat Singh and Wazir Ali dared to challenge the authority of the East India Company. The Books successfully traced the heroic deeds of these two revolutionary heroes, supported by proper evidence from archival sources.

The entire region, from Banaras to Gorakhpur, was on fire during the rebellion, and recalcitrant Rajput and Bhumihaar zamindars, who owed allegiance to Jagat Singh, were now building up active resistance against the Company. The anti-British struggle was not always coordinated, despite the attempts of Wazir Ali and Jagat Singh to establish a unified command against the English troops. Banaras, the cherry which the English East India Company dreamt of possessing, had been turned into an inferno within a single day. The English were definitely on the back foot, and Jagat Singh's personality proved too overwhelming for them.

It seemed that the English East India Company, under the influence of General Erskine, was interested in snuffing out any remnants of the revolt. The indiscriminate use of power, brazen display of authority, and bending of all legal conventions went into the trial and confinement

of Jagat Singh at Chunar. Despite adopting these devious stratagems, the Company's officials realised that Jagat Singh had built up an extensive network of elites and locals to drive out the English from Banaras. He had been more than a worthy rival, and he was also unwilling to come to any understanding with the British for his reprieve and to seek any pecuniary entitlements, which included a pension. Jagat Singh's fate was much different from that of his fellow conspirator Wazir Ali. The Banaras court passed a sentence that Jagat Singh be transported for life to the lonely island of St. Helena.

One of the important aspects of Babu Jagat Singh's remarkable journey of life, as aptly addressed by the authors in the books, is that he was not given adequate credit for discovering, though unintentionally, the world-famous Buddhist site of Sarnath near Banaras in 1787. Some historians, such as Sahni (1914: 9; 1922: 6), Altekar (1937/2025: 110), Majumdar (1947: 38), Agrawala (1956/1984: 17), Narain (1959: 173), Sukul (1974: 12), Singh (1980: 41), Bhatia (2008: 46), and others (cf. Singh et al., 2024), have given undue credit to the Englishmen and overlooked the first strike on the site by Jagat Singh and his labourers, which holds immense archaeological and religious significance. On the contrary, historians criticised him for destroying the Dharmarajika Stupa. However, Cunningham (1871: 123) recognised that "a large brick tower was discovered ... that was opened by Jagat Singh's men." He also gives credit to him for the earliest excavation of the site. Mr Jonathan Duncan (1798), the Resident Commissioner of Banaras, in his report, mentions that "the incidental discovery made by Jagat Singh has opened the era of archaeological exploration at Sarnath," which was recorded in the Asiatic Researches (Sahni 1914: 9).

Contributions

Some of the salient features and truth-worthy contributions of the book are noted here:

1. Babu Jagat Singh was never a Diwan (a treasury officer) of the Rajas of Banaras; he was the holder of a *tahud* (*ijara*, contract) of the Parganas under his charge, including Shivpur, which consisted of Sarnath. In fact, a similarly named Jagat Dev Singh was a *Naib* (Deputy) of Raja Mahipnarain Singh (Qureshi & Pathak 2024a: xxix, Qureshi & Pathak 2024b: 30, referring to CPC, 1938). Under such circumstances, the earlier writers on Sarnath have wrongly accused Babu Jagat Singh of vandalism in Sarnath by wrongly stating that he was the Diwan and the alleged vandal. Unfortunately, the works produced on Sarnath have proven to be merely copies of incorrect information and facts that are repeated over time by writers. None of the copyists has tried to search the original sources that prove that Babu Jagat Singh was not the Diwan. This fact is approved by the new and worthy information presented in this book, which is based on extensive research and the original and authentic sources cited throughout.
2. It is definite that Babu Jagat Singh, revenue collector of Shivpur Pargana, merely knew that there were bricks and stones available at Sarnath and had ordered the digging of the site, as the ruins were concealed underground with debris, dust and dense vegetative growths of centuries together unknowingly in the form of a vast circular hole but as soon as some Buddhist relics and a statue of Buddha with an inscription of the Pala King Mahipala at the foot, bearing an inscription of Vikrama Samvata 1083 (CE 1026), were found, the digging was closed (Narain 1959: 174). The interior brickwork was excavated only partially, and about half of the mass, almost 6 feet above the stone box, was found 27 feet below, which was left in its original place. When Jagat Singh realised that this was a great Buddhist sacred place, he did his best to preserve and restore it. At this site, he found the 'one cylindrical green marble *Manjusha*' (a relic casket), out of which human bones were not destroyed as alleged but routinely immersed in the

sacred Ganga (Ganges) River as a devout Hindu will do ritually. He also preserved other items found there, including decayed pearls, gold leaves, and other valuable jewels, and handed them over to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta (Kolkata). However, these have been found missing before 1834, as mentioned by Cunningham in his letter to James Prinsep (Qureshi & Pathak 2004a: 79; Qureshi & Pathak 2004b: 91). All this is known from the accounts of Jonathan Duncan, Resident in the Asiatic Researches in 1798, which was reprinted in 1799 and the report by Alexander Cunningham (1871: 119).

3. Babu Jagat Singh securely kept the statue of Buddha, and the inscription of the same was installed in the Rāma Sāgar tank, built by him before his residence in Jagatganj during the period 1787-1792. Due to the above incident, the people popularly referred to it as the 'Jagat Singh Stupa', which continued to be known as such till the second decade of the 20th Century, when it was rightly named the 'Dharmarajika Stupa' to denote the original installation by the Great Emperor Ashoka [c. 304 – 232 BCE]. In the first sketch of the ruins at Sarnath by Major M. Kittoe (1851-52), it was already mentioned as 'Jagat Singh's Stupa' (cf. Singh et al., 2024: 168; Qureshi & Pathak 2004a: 75; Qureshi & Pathak 2004b: 88). Even the first archaeological report on Sarnath by Sahini (1914: 170) referred to this site as 'Jagat Singh's Stupa'. However, over time, Jagat Singh was mentioned as a destroyer when the stone plate was installed there. Thus, by all means, and from every perspective, it can be ascertained that Babu Jagat Singh was the explorer and preserver of the site and the many relics associated with it.
4. Further evidence is when Major Markham Kittoe, who excavated this stupa in 1851-52, received the Buddha statue from Jagat Singh, along with a

description and an inscription, which he then handed over to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Whereas Major Markham Kittoe thoroughly excavated the Dharmarajika Stupa and named it 'Jagat Singh's Stupa'; after his death, Edward Thomas (1854) continued it, during which the inner material was removed, and the foundation of the outer casing was exposed. Alexander Cunningham left about 40 statues found by him during excavation on the ground in Sarnath; over time, the British engineer Davidson, in 1835, placed all of them in a cart and threw them into the Varuna (*Varaṇā*) River under the bridge to check the cutting away of the bed between the arches. Cunningham (1871: 106) himself informs us: "An instance of ruthless spoliation, I may here remark, that, in the erection of one of the bridges over the river Barnā (*Varaṇā*/Varuna), forty-eight statues and other sculptured stones were removed from Sarnāth and thrown into the river, to serve as a breakwater to the piers; and that, in the erection of the second bridge, the iron one, from fifty to sixty card-loads of stones from the Sarnāth buildings were employed."

5. As per the Hindi and English stone carvings placed at this stupa at Sarnath, all sorts of allegations are levelled against Babu Jagat Singh and are presented in an awful light. This incident is a historical error which needs to be rectified. The factual errors and misinformation have now, for many years, positioned Babu Jagat Singh as a vandal, but in fact, he was the pioneer explorer and preserver of the same. It is high time that both these planted carvings on stone should be replaced with factual and authentic details to make it clear who the real preserver of it was and who the destroyer was!
6. It is high time that we correct the generalised narrative of this crucial site of Sarnath. It is vital that as a Nation, we recognise the contributions of 'Indians',

the real heroes of this country, who have done significant work of preserving the 'sites' and heritage that we share with future citizens and children. It was not always foreigners who preserved the sites but the Indians. This is particularly significant in times when the nation celebrates 'Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav' [celebrating India's 75th year of Independence] and remembers the lost heroes and heroines.

The books are indeed valuable for their minute and authentic details, which have been collated and interpreted from a massive corpus of books, archival materials, archaeological reports, Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) documents, British correspondence, and letters, among other sources. It is very readable, thanks to its simple and lucid style of writing, and will definitely attract a readership, awakening the young generations to know the intricacy and complexity of the British period. In this context, it becomes essential that Babu Jagat Singh is accorded the right place in history.

In the book review session (11 February 2024), Professor R.S. Basu [Kolkata] remarked, "From the standpoint of a historian, despite the element of hagiography that is quite visible in some of the pages of the book, 'Babu' Jagat Singh's revolt was more of a reaction on the part of the Indian landed elite to recover their material possessions and social honour which had been deprived to them by the English;" this has to be taken as a critical appraisal. At the same platform, Professor P.K. Ghosh [Lucknow] mentioned that "the book is a unique study of the 'lost hero' of Banaras, which sets the trend for similar studies in the future. The book's authors did complete justice in presenting the profound character of Babu Jagat Singh—the Man par excellence".

We want to finish our appeal to the concerned authorities with an important question related to the status of the cylindrical 'green marble *Manjusha*' (a relic casket) and its relics, which were handed over to the Asiatic Society of Bengal (Kolkata). Unfortunately, it has been found missing, as mentioned by Cunningham

himself. A thorough search needs to be conducted to locate it in all the world's museums to bring it back to India, as it is an integral part of our country's cultural heritage and past. This book is a befitting homage and tribute to his ancestral hero, Babu Jagat Singh, by his representative successor, Pradeep Narayan Singh, who reached the expected destination with a good spirit despite facing all the troubles and challenges. Of course, since the book challenges many of the well-narrated and repetitive stories of colonial Banaras, it will naturally create some controversies; however, this will encourage further research in cultural history more righteously (cf. Singh, 2024: 14).

Impact of the Books on the Cultural Renaissance

Taking into view the authentic proofs from archives and reports, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) finally accredited the pioneering role of 'Babu' Jagat Singh in excavating the ancient site of Dharmarajika and approved the correction in the stone tablet at the site (GOI-ASI 2024); therefore, following the instruction and approved draft of the old matter of the stone tablet has been replaced by the corrected one on the 10th January 2025, mentioning the credit to 'Babu' Jagat Singh. The local public and the government authorities have also taken the lead in honour 'Babu' Jagat Singh as the hero of civil disobedience and the first revolutionary in the Banaras state, as illustrated in the iron-pillared massive gate (cost INR 0.934 million) near the neighbourhood of Jagatganj installed on 27 October 2024 by the Public Works Department of Varanasi in the grand celebration attended by state ministers, noble citizens, and administrative personnel. The book's contents, particularly those related to Sarnath, will serve as a strong supporting platform to expedite the site's inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which has been pending on the Tentative List since 1998 (cf. Shinde & Singh 2023; Singh et al., 2024).

Concluding Remarks

The British rulers declared Jagat Singh anti-British, the leader of civil disobedience, and the destroyer of the sacred site of Sarnath. This

narrative somehow casts Jagat Singh's contributions into the shadows, even after India's 77 years of independence. The cause behind this negligence has also been the government's secularist ideology. However, a recent cultural renaissance has provided a platform for re-assessing the regional colonial cultural history, and the first such product is the present book. This will encourage the coming generation of researchers to investigate the regional historiography of the colonial period. The book also proved that the continuity of the revolution and civil disobedience had already existed long before the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. In the book release seminar, Basu (2024) noted that the book may be weak in terms of hagiography, which may be acceptable only to some extent. Ghosh (2024) notes that the book introduces readers to the genealogy and some rare photographs of the Jagatganj Rajparivar and features an exhaustive bibliography encompassing both primary and secondary sources, all of which are appropriately documented.

Of course, being the first such attempt, the book also has some limitations regarding the systemic and systematic presentation of facts, their linkages, their narration, and some slips in properly citing sources. The book is indeed valuable for its minute details, which have been collected from the massive corpus of books and archival materials, making it a comprehensive compendium. The analysis and interpretations are, in some places, sketchy and disconnected.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical considerations have been central to the research, which relies on existing studies of the selected sources. Due acknowledgement and citation of the original sources have been given in the text.

Conflict of Interest

There has been no pecuniary interest in undertaking this review essay. We declare that there is no conflict of interest (financial or non-financial interests). We certify that the AI has not been used at any level.

Authors' Contribution Statement

Together, we accept full responsibility for synthesising the viewpoints of our interpretations.

Informed Consent

There is no such issue.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing does not apply to this research as no data were generated or analysed.