The history of the first war of independence of 1857-58 continues to be a matter of great significance for the country and an issue of absorbing interest for the students of history. The causes of the so called mutiny or revolt have been variously understood and interpreted by the historians. The literature which is now available on this great event, amply proves that it was much more than a mutiny or revolt. Marx was the first person who termed 1857's uprising as the first war of independence. Savarkar, perhaps under the influence of Marx, wrote a full fledged book under the title, "The Indian War of Independence 1857". In fact the archival evidence, such as letters and despatches written and sent by the English officers to their family members, friends and government officials; the vernacular newspapers specially Urdu, the histories written by both the loyalist Indians and the English officers, the impartial persons and the folk literature clearly indicate that the events of 1857-58 in reality constituted the first war of independence. In this war, the beginning was made by the Sepoys and hence many historians of the period termed it as mutiny. Other sections of the people also joined the Sepoys. It was thus termed as a revolt by some historians and writers. A large number of historians, both English and Indians, however, termed it as a rebellion.

in view of the participation of a very large number of people hailing from a cross section of the society. Marx's and Savarkar's contention that it was the first war of independence is largely explained through their writings. Marx argues that the people rose against the English rule chiefly because it was exploitative, it ruined the indigenous industries, it destroyed the agriculture, inundated the Indian markets with its own products destroying the cotton industries, high taxation in agriculture and on Indian manufactured goods, which brought about a total ruin of the Indian people. Poverty and hunger became the order of the day. Greatly dissatisfied and grievously suppressed Indians broke into rebellion against the English authority. The Christian missionaries with the full support of the government, adopted a very aggressive posture and maligned Islam and Hinduism, and endeavoured to convert them to Christianity. This was naturally deeply resented by both the communities. This was not all. Even the most important segment of the English army i.e. the Sepoys, who had been instrumental in the conquest of their own homeland for their alien masters, were subjected to discrimination, humiliation and economic distress. Consequently, the regions where the Indian people, including Sepoys who suffered at the hands of their masters, broke into rebellion with avowed object to establish a government to be run by Indians.

The flash point of the rebellion, as is well known, came at Meerut on 10th May, 1857. The very next day, as could be expected, Delhi became the centre of rebels' activities. The rebels gave vent
to their hatred and anger against the English by killing all those on whom they could lay their hands in the most atrocious manner.

As Delhi became the centre stage of the rebel activities, the Sepoys refused to obey their English masters. The people of Delhi also extended their full support to them. Bahadur Shah does not seem to have been optimistic about the outcome of this spontaneous outburst of peoples' anger. As a result, he was reluctant to join the rebels but later he surrendered to the pressure of the Sepoys and assumed their leadership. He still enjoyed the love and respect of the people of India. The anger and hatred of the rebels against the English led them to indiscriminately kill many of them in Delhi. In many cases even women and children were not spared despite Bahadur Shah's best efforts to save them. The beginning of the revolt was sudden and it was not preceded by any planning and preparation. The Sepoys who were in the forefront of the revolt lacked economic resources and had no money. Bahadur Shah himself was a pensioner of the English. He was a king only in name. His treasury was empty but the requirements of running an administration were enormous. Even the Sepoys who had staked their lives for the cause of liberating the country from the yoke of the English, did not possess resources to meet their bare minimum needs. For meeting these needs they resorted to loot and plunder. This naturally led to chaos, and the law and order situation badly deteriorated. Some of the more ambitious and less scrupulous Sepoys now also endeavoured to advance their
own personal interests and started collecting money through more plunders. Many robbers and other antisocial elements did the same in disguise of the Sepoys. To control the situation Bahadur Shah himself went to the city and requested the frightened shopkeepers to open their shops. But his visit and appeal made little impact on them as they knew well that this could not ensure their safety. The combined effect for the people meant greater hardship.

The conditions further worsened due to the factionalism that emerged under the patronage of different Princes. The Princes were impoverished and inexperienced. They tried to collect money for their own pleasure pursuits. As a result, instead of making any serious effort to control this downward slide, they instigated and encouraged looting and plunder in the name of administration. The people were exposed to mere rapine and no relief was forthcoming. Some of the neighbouring states like Bahadurgarh, Dujana, Farrukhnagar and Jhajhjhar had also joined the rebels and supported the Sepoys. The Khanazads of Nuh remained Loyal to the English, while the rulers of Ballabgharh, Pataudi, Loharu and Rewari adopted a dual policy hob-nobbing with both the English and the rebels at the same time. The rulers of Jhajhjhar and Bahadurgarh extended some financial support to Bahadur Shah but it was insignificant and entirely inadequate to meet the requirements of maintaining an army which was expected to fight the well organised and fully equipped English army.
The Sepoys trained and brought up in the rough and tough atmosphere of the barracks, naturally lacked etiquette and manners. They did not know how to behave in the presence of the King. Inspite of all the limitations and constrains, highest standards of culture and polite mannerism was observed at the court, which was totally alien to the Sepoys. They sometimes behaved in most disrespectful manner with the King. This uncouth behaviour naturally annoyed the King. The exalted Fort now became the residence of the rebel infantry with all its attendant consequences. The King was bereft of any authority. He asked the Princes to provide relief and protection to the people who were badly harassed by the Sepoys but there was little impact of his sermons. For maintaining law and order in the city Thanedars were appointed but most of them were incompetent and powerless.

After the appearance of Bakht Khan on the scene the situation somewhat changed. Bahadur Shah who had earlier appointed the Princes to different positions of authority, now abolished all such appointments. He conferred on Bakht Khan unprecedented honours as well as responsibilities. Bakht Khan succeeded in checking the increasing chaos in Delhi with an iron hand and brought the conditions of Delhi under control to some extent. But the Princes did not like it and became extremely jealous as they also lost much of their power and influence. They started creating problems for Bakht Khan and conspiring against him. With a view to counter it, Bahadur Shah gave full authority to Bakht Khan
to deal with the Princes as the situation demanded and even to punish them if they indulged in loot and plunder. But in spite of his best efforts Bakht Khan could not succeed in stopping the Princes who were hell bent on exploiting the situation to their advantage and did not even hesitate to take resort to plunder and rapine with a view to fill their own coffers. Bakht Khan had abolished a number of taxes which were imposed on the people ostensibly for raising necessary resources for running the government. This was done, in spite of severe resource crunch, to provide relief to the people who were the worst sufferers of the chaotic conditions prevailing in Delhi. But the Princes continued to realise these taxes bringing the gallant efforts of Bakht Khan in this regard to naught. People continued to suffer and reel under the push and pull of these forces working at cross purposes.

While all this was happening in Delhi, the ousted English officers from Delhi were licking their wounds and making feverish preparations for a come back. They adopted the old policy of dividing their opponents to break the unity of the Sepoys. They tried their best to create Hindu-Muslim dissension among the Sepoys by sowing seeds of communal hatred among them, so as to break their power. But the Sepoys remained united and fought jointly. The Pandits and Maulvis urged the members of their communities to remain united against the English and frustrate their designs. Bahadur Shah played a very important role in the task of maintaining this unity and emerged as a symbol of communal harmony. He took
concrete steps to maintain the unity. Among other things, he banned the cow slaughter on the occasion of Eid-Al-Azha. Moreover, when the people asked him to declare the war against the English a jihad, he refused on the ground that majority of the Sepoys were Hindus. This shows the far sightedness of the old King, which prevented a division among the Sepoys and inspired a sense of confidence among them.

It would seem that the old King had a clear vision of the situation. He fully understood that India was standing at cross roads. A sagacious and clear sighted leadership with the support of the people could lead to the permanent banishment of the English. But a false step would bring disastrous consequences for the country. He seems to have been fully aware of the complexities of the situation and clearly realised that unless all the sections of the people extended their full support for the new dispensation, it was bound to fail. It was necessary to take the people in confidence, inspire them and hold out to them the hope of a bright future, when aliens would be banished from the country and they will be masters of their own destiny. They needed to be reassured that though the present conditions were difficult but a bright future was beckoning them.

With this objective in view, Bahadur Shah issued a number of Proclamations. In these Proclamations he dwelt at large about the nature of the ongoing struggle against the English. He also tried to spell out to the people the shape of the things when the
English would be banished from the country and true Indian rule would be established. He compared the repressive English rule and delineated the advantages that will accrue to the people when once their own rule was established. He also took care of ideological issues which were involved in the struggle against the English. All the sections of the society were assured that their particular interests would be fully taken care of. But for achieving all this, it was necessary that this struggle should be pursued relentlessly with complete sincerity of purpose and singleness of mind.

The rebels were deeply annoyed with all those sections of the society who were supporting the English. They included mostly members of the upper classes such as Zamindars, Talukadars, moneylenders and their agents. It was only natural that they harboured deepest sense of hostility and animosity against them. They attacked their houses, plundered them and destroyed their account books. This only made them more nervous and apprehensive about the future shape of the things to come and were more convinced that their salvation lay in the re-establishment of the English rule.

In that state of uncertainty and tension, when all kinds of problems were galore, the Princes exhibited unbelievable shortsightedness and lack of vision. Unlike Bahadur Shah, they seem to have been blissfully ignorant of the gravity of the situation. Instead of directing their efforts to save the country and themselves from the impending catastrophe, they spent their time in conspiring against the King, Bakht Khan and against each other
so that they could extract their own pound of flesh. There were many other people also who were constantly conspiring against the King and the rebels and supporting the English with money, material and above all with vital inputs regarding the conditions of Delhi and the rebels. They also worked overtime to spread all kinds of rumours to create dissension among the ranks of the rebels in particular and the people in general and convince them of the futility of their efforts and the invincibility of the English. They also served as English informers and spies. These people like Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, Ilahi Bakhsh, Moinuddin Hasan Khan and others were apparently with the King and the rebels but actually they were loyal to the English. When Bakht Khan reached Delhi, Bahadur Shah gave him sweeping power abolishing all earlier arrangements and posts. It incurred jealousy among the Princes against him. They constantly conspired against him. Mirza Mughal especially had little liking for Bakht Khan as his independent authority on all state affairs and in decision making process had been subordinated to the wisdom of Bakht Khan. Blinded with their selfish interests, they forgot the very object of their struggle. And later on this internal conflict caused great harm to the rebel unity. The army was divided into three factions. As a result no unity of command which is so essential for the success of such endeavours, could be possible. This proved to be one of the most important causes of the failure of the rebellion. It is, however, interesting to note that the rebel forces which had revolted on the introduction of
Enfield rifles as greased catridges were used in it, fought with the same weapon as long as they could.

The arrival of Nicholson with his army at Delhi marked the beginning of the end of the rebels' rule. With their superior arms, tenacity and diplomacy they far outweighed the rebel army. In fact the rebel army with all the attendant problems was no match to them. It was an unequal fight and its consequences were not hidden to those with a discerning eye. It was before long that the resistance collapsed and Delhi was captured by the English. The English launched a reign of terror in Delhi and massacred a large number of innocent people alongwith the rebels. It is, however, worth noting that though they crushed the rebellion but they could not kill the spirit that had kindled it. It remained alive in the innermost recesses of the hearts of many Indians and no amount of repression could entirely erase their longing for freedom. It continued to smoulder under apparent calm and when the opportune time came it came forth with all the vigour. The great national freedom movement that won the freedom for the country has undoubtedly its roots in this first war of independence.