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- ABOUT US
- RESEARCH
- NEWS
- EVENTS
- GRANTS
- PEOPLE
- PUBLICATIONS
- CONTACT

You are here: [Home](#) ▶ [Research](#) ▶ [2010-2011](#) ▶ Insurgency, Violence and Anticolonial Resistance: The 1857 Revolt and Indian Imaginations

2016-2017

2015-2016

2014-2015

2013-2014

2012-2013

2011-2012

2010-2011

2009-2010

2008-2009

2007-2008

2006-2007

## INSURGENCY, VIOLENCE AND ANTICOLONIAL RESISTANCE: THE 1857 REVOLT AND INDIAN IMAGINATIONS

**Principal Investigators:** Pranav Jani, Department of English

While historical and cultural studies of the 1857 Revolt in India have typically told the story using British sources, few have examined its impact on Indian identity. That is what Pranav Jani has set out to do in this ambitious project. A grant from the Mershon Center allowed him to spend a year doing research at the Nehru Memorial Library and National Archives of India, as well as battle sites where the revolt has been memorialized.

Jani is investigating Indian portrayals of the 1857 revolt in three ways. First, he is looking at the many strands of anticolonial resistance in the Indian nationalist movement of the 20th century. One example is the life JP Narayan, an Indian revolutionary of the interwar period. Though typically seen as a moderate associated with Gandhi, Narayan spent time at Berkeley, Wisconsin and Ohio State, where he studied sociology and became a Marxist. His changing philosophies walked the line between violence vs. non-violence in the Indian independence movement.

Second, Jani is trying to identify 19th century Indian sources on the 1857 revolt. Because few Indian voices were recorded, Jani has used British sources reading between the lines. For example, one file from the late 19th century argued against the pardon of a prisoner named Narain Singh. Captured in 1857, Singh was put on a ship to a penal colony but organized a mutiny, went back to India, and rejoined rebel forces. He was captured again and imprisoned for 20 years, but never stopped trying to organize rebellion. To the British he was the worst sort of criminal, but to Indian nationalists he would be considered a hero.

Finally, Jani visited several sites of the 1857 mutiny to see how they are represented today. One town, Jhansi, was home to Rani Lakshmi Bai, who led the local rebellion against the British. A painting depicts the queen riding into battle with her son strapped to her back, and she has achieved near mythic status in song, film and novels. But displays at the fort she captured and nearby museum tell different stories of her life, while local people have different interpretations. Some call her a role model for women while others say she represents female virtues of the past.

Jani presented his first paper from this project in October and eventually plans a book manuscript.



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Research

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News

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Annual Reports

Events

News and Events

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Fact Sheet

Grants

Research

East Asian Studies Center

Experts List

[People](#)

[Arts and Culture](#)

[Faculty Books](#)

[Publications](#)

[Alumni](#)

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[Furniss Award](#)

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