

Indian Resistance to the Early East India Company's Forces at Shamli

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The 'Treaty of Bassein' was considered the most harmful by Daulat Rao Sindhia, the ruler of Gwalior. And so the war was declared which had resulted into the 'Treaty of Surji Anjangaon' on 30th December, 1803. This was the scene of the Deccan and in northern India; General Lake had captured the fort of Aligarh. He entered Delhi and was received well by Shah Alam II. The local leaders, the Sikhs and all the Maratha officers posted in the upper Ganga Yamuna Doab region opposed the East India Company. At Shamli, the Britishers were opposed and were not allowed to enter the gates of the town. Ghasi Ram, a local zamindar remained loyal to his Masters, the Marathas during the episode of 1804. After 53 years his son Mohar Singh

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opposed the company's rule during Indian Revolution of 1857 and so was executed severally.

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In the beginning of the 19th century, the geographical area comprising of present Uttar Pradesh had to undergo some totally different experience. In fact, in November 1801, the 'Treaty of Lucknow' was concluded that had given to the East India Company the whole of the lower and central portions of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab region, Gorakhpur and a major portion of Rohilkhand. The 'Treaty of Lucknow'¹ was followed by the 'Treaty of Bassein', which was considered the most harmful by Daulat Rao Sindhia, the ruler of Gwalior. And so, war was declared which had resulted into the 'Treaty of Surjianjangaon'². According to it, Sindhia had to give up the Upper Doab region and Delhi including the neighbouring parts of Haryana. All these areas were handed over to the East India Company. Thus from the last months of 1803, the Company's control over these geographical portions gained legalized shape by the Surji Anjangaon Treaty.

But, in reality, in the vicinity of present day districts of Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, Saharanpur and Shamli the Britishers had been opposed strongly by the local leaders of the region. People took arms against the British forces at several places in the Upper Ganga-Yamuna Doab. There existed a number of Indians at local level, who led the armed resistance against the forces of the East India Company. Among the first and foremost local leaders were the Marathas³ already settled or posted like Madho Rao Phalke⁴, and his son Rama Rao Phalke and their adherents operating in the country of the districts of Aligarh and Bulandshahar. Madho Rao and Rama Rao were operating from Malagarh, a fort of considerable strength situated on the left bank of the River Kali, some five miles upstream the district head-quarters of Bulandshahr.⁵ The Company's forces under General Lake remain victorious and that general rapidly had marched towards Delhi where he had been received well by the Emperor Shah Alam II in the Red Fort. The fall of the Aligarh Fort; and the Battle of Delhi (actually the 'Battle of Patparganj' but more

* Originally, its name was not Aligarh but it was Ramgarh. Afrasiyab Khan, the Governor of Koil and one of the lieutenants of the then Mir Bakhshi Mirza Najaf Khan, changed it to please his master as the latter was a follower of the Shia sect.

historically the 'Battle of Jeetgarh'⁶ i.e. present day Golf Course of Noida) gave safe way to General Lake. The Marathas were looser though they kept resisting the British continuously. Describing the scene, Mr. Nevill, in his Gazetteer of District Muzaffarnagar records⁷ :

"The British marched upon Delhi, and defeating a Sikh contingent under Louis Bourquin expelled the Mahrattas, and eventually Muzaffarnagar came under into their position with the remainder of the conquered provinces. A few days after the capture of Delhi, Colonel Burn occupied Saharanpur."

Though Colonel Burn had controlled Saharanpur, but his position was totally unsafe due to both the Sikhs's warfare tactics as well as his own military strength. And as soon as he could assess the danger he was in, he gave a call for immediate help⁸ :

"He [Colonel Burn] had, however hardly reached it [Saharanpur] when the Sikhs were again on the border. Lieutenant Birch with a party of najibs pushed on to watch the fords while reinforcements were asked for from Delhi."

At this juncture Lieutenant-Colonel James Skinner⁹ came forward to help. It is a matter of research, treachery and further study why all the Europeans and Eurasians suddenly had shown their disloyalty towards the Indian rulers. General Peron, the European General of Sindhia's forces having his military head-quarters at the Aligarh fort, had been proved disloyal to his master, Daulat Rao Sindhia, the ruler of Gwalior. The European and Eurasian lieutenants under General Peron were seen following him in their further behavior that was nothing but full of disloyalty.

Within the time bracket when the Britishers were feeling weak against the Indian resistance, James Skinner, one of the very lieutenants of General Peron, came forward to help the Company's forces. Nevill again records¹⁰ :

"Colonel James Skinner with strong detachment of some 800 irregular horse crossed the Jumna lower down and completely surprised the enemy (February 1804), routing them with great loss. Posts were then established along the Jumna, and a battalion of the Begam's from Sardhana occupied Chilkana. But the Sikh sardars tendered their submission and all was peace for a time."

Again, the Indian resistance was given to the British in Delhi by Harnath, the adopted son of Jaswant Rao Holkar, the ruler of

Indore. To meet out the threat thus created in September 1804, Colonial Ochterlony recalled the forces and troops stationed at Saharanpur to aid in the defence of Delhi. Due to the presence of Holkar's forces, the Upper Ganga-Yamuna Doab region rose in the rear. The Sikh leaders, Sher Singh and Rai Singh of Bhuriya and few others took the advantage.¹¹ These courageous leaders came forward crossing the River Yamuna. The terror thus created was so high to the British officers that Mr. Guthrie, the Collector was feeling danger to life.

Giving few details about the scene, what Mr. Nevill further adds, is worth mentioning¹² :

“The Sikh chiefs were not inclined to give up their claims to raki and kambali from the Duab without a struggle, and, notwithstanding their submission in March, were prepared to take advantage of the opportunity afforded by the advance of Holkar's forces in October to vindicate their alleged rights. They marched down by Damjhera, where a skirmish is said to have taken place, and thence by Chilkana, where the Saiyids offered some feeble resistance”.

The town of Sultanpur has its greater importance as the owners of it are still considered the oldest zamindar family there in the region. Here, all the big brick-built houses were raised to ground leaving only one that was owned by an old servant of the Sikhs.¹³ Hearing the news of Sikh army's arrival, Mr. Guthrie shut himself up in the old fort named Qila Ahmadabadi.¹⁴ He is said to have taken all the important records and treasure along with him in that fort.

To assist him, Colonel Burn left Delhi for Saharanpur. On 25th October, 1804. He was commanding a force consisting of 2nd battalion of 14th Native Infantry, a battalion of Irregulars under Captain Harriot and six guns including one 18-pounder, one 12-pounder and four 6-pounder ones.¹⁵

At this point of juncture Jaswant Rao Holkar tried to cut the whole of that British contingent and so he had marched from Delhi to fulfill his purpose. Already there was posted a Maratha cavalry there near the town of Kandhla. It was a sharp decision to assist the Indian side that way. With the determination of cutting off the small British force destined for the relief of Mr. Guthrie, Holkar's march has been thus recorded by Mr. Williams¹⁶ :

“After a vain attempt to cut his way through the enemy, whose swarms were hourly increasing, Colonel Burn found himself constrained, on the morning of the 30th, to occupy a small mud fort under the very walls of Shamli, a hostile town, which closed its gates against him. The villagers all know the spot well. It was afterwards distinguished by one of the most gallant fights, and one of the most cold-blooded massacres that ever happened during the mutiny. His situation was, to all appearance, desperate. The detachment amounted to barely 1,500 men, the force beleaguering it to fully 20,000, without counting a reinforcement of Sikhs, and the townspeople showed the same spirit that characterized their conduct in later days, not only intercepting supplies and harbouring the enemy within their walls, but themselves taking an active part in the assault.”

He further adds¹⁷ :

“Their matchlockmen, sheltered by the ramparts, kept up such a deadly fire upon our sepoy in the fort beneath that they actually did greater execution than Holkar’s regulars, putting upwards of one hundred men hors de combat before Colonel Burn was relieved by General Lake on the 3rd November. In the interval, the garrison fought with devoted bravery amid cruel privations.”

It is a matter of the imperialistic approach of the English that they have been observed having bias while describing the ‘Europeans’ conduct in tough times. Then, invariably try to prove them better at war and bravery. The following is an example :

“In the interval, the garrison fought with devoted bravery amid cruel privations. The same cannot be said of the Mahratha host, who vanished at the sight of the dust rising along the Delhi road in advance of the British column.”

Being an important station during the later half of the last century in general and the Afghan-Maratha conflicts in particular, Shamli proved itself a more strategic station. This time, again, during Anglo-Maratha conflicts, Shamli was experiencing the same. It had bad experiences of the foreign invaders and still the memory relating to the Abdali’s invasion was in townspeople’s minds. To their minds the Marathas were friendly. The set back caused by the fall of Aligarh fort of Sindhia’s forces at the hands of General Lake at Aligarh was

removed totally by the presence of Holkar's forces at Delhi. Treachery committed by General Peron could not be a thing of last longer.

So was the reason the gates of Shamli were kept closed for the Britishers. Colonel Burn had to go back from these gates.

In fact, the confidence in Holkar was of much higher degree in Indians' minds' might be assessed examining the Dunde Khan's resistance in 1807, a three year later episode.¹⁸ He was confident enough to oppose the East India Company's forces on his own in the neighbouring areas of Kamauna Fort¹⁹ in the country of Bulandshahr. As a matter of fact, Marathas were still considered undefeatable in general and in the Upper Doab in particular.

The townspeople of Shamli were at good relations with the Marathas is also evident from Ghasi Ram's case. He was the most loyal to the Indian side and was working for them. Till his last, he showed full loyalty and opposed to the Britishers. Due to his support, Colonel Burn could not be allowed inside Shamli. His son was Mohar Singh who was hanged till death in the then tehsl campus at Shamli on account of his participation in Indian Revolution of 1857. In this context what the District Gazetteer records is worth mentioning²⁰ :

“The episode curiously illustrates the force of hereditary predisposition. Ghasi Ram, the leading Jat zamindar of the place, was chiefly instrumental in stopping Colonel Burn's supplies and otherwise annoying his forces. His son Mohar Singh, following in the paternal footsteps, was consequently hanged on account of similar achievements during the year 1857.”

There exist many a similar cases in which the descendants have followed the same path and played the same role what their ancestors had showed. Like the case of Mohar Singh²¹ of Shamli is that of the Tantes²² of Oopar Kot of Bulandshahr. Same is that of Chaudhary Hardayal Singh²³, grandfather of Uttari Bharat Ke Pramukhtam Swatantrata Senani Chaudhry Raghubir Narayan Singh (Tyagi) of Asauda Riyasat²⁴ (Hapur).

Notes and References

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2. Ibid., 334. Professor Jadunath Sarkar writes : “Daulat Rao Sindhia, too, at last saw reason. After some diplomatic shuffling and evasive talks, he signed the Treaty of Sarji Anjangaon, on 30th December, 1803, on the following terms :
 - i. Sindhia ceded to the East India Company and its allies, in perpetual sovereignty, all his forts, territories and rights in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab, and his rights and claims in the countries lying north of the Jaipur and Jodhpur kingdoms, and the Gohad Rana's territory.
 - ii. Sindhia ceded to the E.I.Co. in perpetual sovereignty the forts of Baroach and Ahmadnagar and then dependent territory, and also the lands lying south of the Ajanta hills.
 - iii. Sindhia renounced all claims of any kind in the above districts as well as of every description upon the British, the Nizam, the Peshwa and the Gaekwad.
 - iv. But Assai, Burhanpur, Pavagarh and then dependencies were restored to Sindhia.
 - v. Sindhia confirmed all the treaties made by the British Government with his feudatories.
 - vi. In the disputes with the Peshwa about their respective rights in Malwa and elsewhere, Sindhia agreed to abide by the decision of the E.I.Co.
 - vii. Sindhia renounced all claims upon the Emperor Shah Alam II and engaged to interfere no further in affairs of His Majesty.
 - viii. Sindhia engaged never to take or retain in his service any European or American or British Indian subject, without the consent of the British.
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6. Vighnesh Kumar, op. cit.
7. H. R. Nevill, ***Muzaffarnagar : A Gazetteer being***, Volume III of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Printed by F. Luker, Superintendent, Govt. Press, United Provinces, Allahabad, 1903, 187.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 187
10. H.R. Nevill, op. cit.
11. ***The Calcutta Review***, LXI, 242. Ghani Bahadur Banda, the first officer of the Sindhia ruler posted at Saharanpur had assigned lands in his area to these Sikh chiefs.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. K. K. Sharma (ed.), ***Saharanpur Sandarbha*** (in Hindi), Saharanpur : Sandarbha Prakashan, 1986, 103.
15. H. R. Nevill, op. cit.
16. The Calcutta Review, LXI, 53.
17. Ibid.
18. Kuar Lachman Singh, op. cit., 18-23.
19. Alpna Poswal, ***Uttar Mughal Kaleen Bulandshahr ka Itihas (1707-1857)***, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis in History, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, 2019, 83-85
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21. Vighnesh Kumar, ***1857 IN 1857 : Original Mutiny Narratives***, Volume I, Meerut : Hastinapur Research Institute, 2013, 36
22. Ibid.
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