

An Introductory Note on the Tihanpuri Syed Brothers (Up To Governorship of Allahabad and Patna)

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Abstract

The Barha Syeds, historically renowned as one of the most influential military aristocratic lineages of the Mughal Empire, comprised four principal branches: Tihanpuri, Chhatrauri, Kundliwal, and Jajneri. Among these, the Tihanpuri branch played a decisive role in the political and military affairs of the late Mughal period. This article examines the early history and rise of the Tihanpuri Syed brothers up to their appointments as the Governors of Allahabad and Patna. It traces the origins of the family, highlighting the pivotal role of Syed Mahmud, whose defection from Sikandar Sur during the siege of Mankot, facilitated through the efforts of Bairam Khan, marked the beginning of the family's close association with the Mughal court. Thereafter, the Barha Syeds earned a distinguished reputation for military service under Emperors Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, frequently leading the imperial vanguard in major campaigns. The study argues that this long-standing tradition of military loyalty and administrative competence laid the foundation for the remarkable political ascendancy of Syed Abdullah Khan and Syed Husain Ali Khan. Their appointments as the Governors of Allahabad and Patna, respectively, not only reflected imperial confidence in their abilities but also positioned them as key actors in the Mughal war of succession initiated by Prince Farrukhsiyar. By situating the Tihanpuri Syed brothers within the broader framework of Mughal political and military history, the article provides a contextual understanding of the origins of their subsequent prominence in imperial politics.

Keywords

Barha Syeds, Siege of Mankot, Tihanpur, Chhat Banur, Kundli, Jajner.

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The clan of the Barha Syeds enjoyed a highly prominent position during the Mughal period.¹ This prominence is attributed to one Syed Mahmud, popularly known as Dade Mahmud² among his descendants as well as among all four branches of the Barha Syeds.³ According to the family tradition, he changed the side at a crucial moment during the 'Siege of Mankot'.⁴ Bairam Khan, the guardian and regent of the young Akbar convinced him to do so in a private secret meeting to desert from the cause of besieged Sikandar Sur.

It is claimed that this defection occurred at Bairam Khan's repeated request and thus Syed Mahmud was influenced by the fact that both men adhered to the Shia faith. Syed Mahmud not only abandoned the cause of his master Sikandar Sur, but also joined Bairam Khan's forces during the conflict.⁵ As a result, Sikandar Sur was made to terms⁶ and Bairam Khan greatly appreciated the assistance rendered by Syed Mahmud.

According to this tradition, from that time onward the Barha Syeds were granted the privilege of leading the *Harawal Dasta* (Advance Guard) of the Mughal army.⁷ This distinction contributed significantly to the prestige, influence, and military importance that the Barha Syeds subsequently enjoyed within the Mughal Empire.

In fact, references to the Barha Syeds can be traced back to the period of the Sayyid dynasty that ruled the Delhi Sultanate.⁸ During the reign of that dynasty, the Barha Syeds were granted a *jagir* consisting of twelve villages in the Upper Ganga-Yamuna Doab, located in what is now Muzaffarnagar District and some areas of the adjoining districts of present-day Uttar Pradesh.

Before their settlement in the *Doab* region, they are believed to have resided in four villages in Punjab and were historically known as the Punjabi Syeds. The community traditionally claims descent from Sayyid Abu'l-Farah Wasti of the town of Wasit near Baghdad.⁹ However, from a historical perspective, this genealogical claim remains open to question and cannot be accepted without reservation.

Some scholars have suggested that the Barha Syeds may have originated from Sindhi Brahmin family that converted to Islam, although this theory is likewise not free from doubt. Other clues have been

interpreted as pointing toward a Punjabi Brahmin origin, but this hypothesis is equally uncertain. Thus, the precise ancestry of the Barha Syeds remains a matter of debate, and none of the competing theories can be regarded as conclusively established.

Whatever the case may be, it appears that during the reign of Emperor Akbar the Barha Syeds were regarded by some contemporaries as descendants of Hindu converts. A tradition supporting this view has been still preserved among the Barha Syeds themselves that and has been passed down through generations.

According to this tradition, the following account is narrated:¹⁰

“Emperor Akbar was once accompanied by several high-ranking officials when the question of the lineage and purity of Syed Mahmud’s clan was raised. When challenged to prove the authenticity of his Sayed ancestry, Syed Mahmud is said to have proposed an ordeal by fire. He declared that he was willing to enter a blazing fire and that, if he emerged unharmed, his claim to pure Sayed descent should be accepted.”

The tradition further relates that Akbar neither allowed Syed Mahmud to undergo the ordeal nor explicitly endorsed or rejected his claim of being pure Syed. Instead, the emperor merely smiled and remained silent. This response has been interpreted in different ways. The descendants of Syed Mahmud have traditionally regarded Akbar’s silence and smile as tacit approval of their claim to Sayed ancestry. Others, however, have viewed the emperor’s reaction as deliberately ambiguous, neither confirming nor denying the claim.

As a result, both interpretations continued to coexist. While many contemporaries reportedly accepted the prevailing public opinion regarding the clan’s origins, Syed Mahmud and his descendants considered their own understanding of the matter to be authoritative.

Based on extensive fieldwork, the authors argue that the available evidence points more strongly toward an Indian origin for the Barha Syeds rather than an Arabic one. Nevertheless, the question of their ancestry remains a subject of historical debate and of differing interpretations as well.

According to the traditional genealogy of the Barha Syeds, their ancestor, Sayyid Abu’l-Farah Wasti is said to be migrated from Baghdad to India along with his twelve sons during the reign of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud,¹¹ the son of Shamsuddin Iltutmish, who ruled the Delhi Sultanate from 1246 to 1266 CE.

A further difficulty with the traditional genealogy of the Barha Syeds lies in its chronology. If the dates given in the tradition are accepted literally, Sayed Abu’l-Farah Wasti would have had to live for more than 200

years, a lifespan that is clearly implausible. On this basis, the authors argue that the claim cannot be accepted as historically reliable.

The tradition further states:¹²

“Abu’l-Farah is said to have remained in India until the reign of Sultan Sikandar Lodi (1489-1517 CE). Upon hearing of the death of Hulagu, he is said to have returned to Persia, leaving behind, by the Sultan’s command, four of his sons, who eventually became the founders of the four principal branches of the Sayed family in this region.”

The chronology of this account is problematic, and the dates alone reveal significant inconsistencies. According to the tradition, the four branches first settled in Punjab, in villages now fall within the territory of Patiala.

The account further identifies the four brothers and the origins of their respective lineages:

- Syed Daud, the eldest brother, settled in Tiharpur (Tehanpur), and his descendants came to be known as the Tehanpuri Syeds.
- Syed Abu’l-Fazl settled in Chhat Banur, and his descendants became known as the Chhatraudi Syeds.
- Syed Abu’l-Fazail settled in Kundli, from which his branch acquired the name Kundliwal Syeds.
- Syed Nazmuddin Husain settled in Jajner, and his descendants became known as the Jajneri or Jajheri Syeds.

These four branches subsequently formed the principal divisions of the Barha Syed community.

From a historiographical perspective, the narrative of Abu’l-Farah and his twelve sons does not withstand close scrutiny. The tradition contains numerous chronological inconsistencies, suggesting that events and figures from different periods may have been merged into a single genealogical account. As a result, the story appears to incorporate both historical memories and later legendary additions.

One of the objections noted in the District Gazetteer is particularly significant:¹³

“Family tradition represents the Sayyids as having continued in the service of Shahab-ud-Din Ghori, but this is chronologically impossible. The earliest inscription connected with the family is that found on the tomb of Ibn Salar Chatrorhi, known as Salar-i-Auliya, at Sambhalhera. The inscription bears the date 777 A.H. (1375 CE) and records him as the eighth descendant of Abu’l-Farah. The parent villages of these families are now entirely insignificant places, with the exception of Chhatbanur, which developed into a large settlement containing several thousand Sayyid inhabitants.”

This observation highlights the chronological difficulties associated with the traditional genealogy. If the earliest verifiable inscription dates from 1375 CE and refers to an eighth-generation descendant of Abu'l-Farah, then the family's claimed association with Shahab-ud-Din Ghorī becomes historically problematic. Such discrepancies suggest that the genealogy, while important as a community tradition, cannot be accepted uncritically as a precise historical record.

With regard to the origins of the Barha Syeds, the authors argue that even during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, they were not universally recognized as Syeds of Arab descent. In the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, Jahangir is reported to have remarked that the personal courage of the Barha Syeds was the strongest evidence in support of their claim to Syed status. According to the authors, this observation implies that there was little other evidence available to substantiate their alleged Arab ancestry.

The authors further contend that, up to Jahangir's reign, the Barha Syeds were commonly regarded by many as descendants of Hindu converts rather than immigrants of Arab origin. In support of this view, they cite the observations of H. R. Nevill, who noted in the District Gazetteer:¹⁴

“...but as early as the reign of Akbar, their claim to be true Sayids was not generally admitted.”

The *Gazetteer* also refers to them by their earlier designation, the “Punjabi Sayyids”. The authors interpret this title as one of the strongest evidences of a Punjabi origin, arguing that the community was historically associated with Punjab before its later settlement in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. In their view, the continued use of the term “Punjabi Sayyids” suggests that the group was originally rooted in the Punjab region rather than being recent migrants from the Arab world.

However, the question of the ancestry of the Barha Syeds remains a matter of historical debate. While some traditions emphasize Arab lineage through descent from the Prophet's family, other interpretations stress local or regional origins within the Indian subcontinent.

Regarding the early division of the Syed families after their settlement in Punjab, the District Gazetteer records the following:¹⁵

“Shortly after their settlement in the Punjab, the family divided into two branches. One of these settled at Bilgram in the present Hardoi District, from where a colony later migrated to Marhera in Etah District. The other branch established itself in the Doab region. Both families claimed a connection with the Sayyid of Khairabad and Fatehpur-Huswa, but as early as the reign of Akbar, their claim to be genuine Sayyids was not generally admitted.”

This account suggests that the family underwent an early geographical and genealogical division following its settlement in Punjab. One branch moved eastward into the regions of Bilgram and Marhera, while the other established itself in the upper Ganga-Yamuna Doab. The Gazetteer further indicates that, despite their claims of Sayed ancestry and connections with other prominent Syed families, the authenticity of these claims was questioned by some contemporaries even during the reign of Emperor Akbar.

The passage is frequently cited by scholars who argue that the origins and genealogy of the Barha Syeds were subjects of debate long before the Mughal empire reached its height.

In due course of time, the Tehanpuri branch of the Barha Syeds rose to extraordinary prominence, particularly during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and after. Among its notable members was Syed Abdullah Khan Barha, who was appointed *Subedar* (Governor) and *Faujdar* of Ajmer.¹⁶ According to the authors, this appointment reflected both his administrative abilities and the prestige attached to his Syed lineage.

Ajmer occupied a position of immense religious significance owing to the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, one of the most revered Sufi saints in South Asia. The city was therefore considered one of the most important religious centres of the Mughal empire. Recognizing Abdullah Khan's piety, competence, and sense of justice, Aurangzeb entrusted him with the administration of that strategically and spiritually important province.¹⁷

Syed Abdullah Khan Barha hailed from Jansath, which is at present a tehsil headquarters of Muzaffarnagar District in Uttar Pradesh. He had several grand sons, among whom the most prominent were:¹⁸

- Hasan Ali Khan Barha
- Husain Ali Khan Barha
- Kamruddin Ali Khan
- Nuruddin Ali Khan,
- Imaduddin Ali Khan
- Sirajuddin Ali Barha
- Najmuddin Ali Khan Barha
- Saifuddin Ali Khan Barha.

Following the death of their grandfather, the brothers sought employment and advancement within the Mughal administration. Despite their efforts, they were unable to secure positions commensurate with their ambitions during Aurangzeb's lifetime.

The situation changed after the death of Aurangzeb on 3 March, 1707 at Burhanpur¹⁹ in the Deccan. His death triggered a fierce struggle for

succession among his surviving sons. At the time, his eldest surviving son, Muazzam (Bahadur Shah I) was stationed in Kabul, while Muhammad Azam Shah and Kam Bakhsh were closer to the imperial court.

Sensing that his death was approaching, Aurangzeb ordered Azam Shah and Kam Bakhsh to proceed to their respective provinces-Bengal and the Deccan. Nevertheless, his death soon led to a series of succession struggles that would profoundly reshape Mughal politics and create new opportunities for ambitious nobles, including the Barha Syeds.

The two elder brothers, Syed Hasan Ali Khan Barha and his younger brother Syed Husain Ali Khan Barha, sought employment in the service of Prince Muazzam,²⁰ who was advancing from Lahore toward Agra following the death of Aurangzeb. Their efforts proved successful, and they were admitted into the prince's service.²¹

Subsequently, both brothers participated in the War of Succession fought between Prince Muazzam and his brother, Prince Azam Shah. This conflict formed part of the larger struggle for the Mughal throne that followed Aurangzeb's death in 1707.

As is well known fact that Prince Muazzam emerged victorious in the decisive battle and ascended the Mughal throne. Upon becoming emperor, he assumed the title Bahadur Shah I. Although his personal name was Muazzam, he had earlier been granted the honorific title "Bahadur Shah" by Aurangzeb, and it was under this regnal name that he ruled the Mughal empire. The victory of Bahadur Shah I marked an important turning point in the careers of the Tihanpuri Barha Syed brothers, whose loyalty and military service during the succession struggle helped to establish their reputation within the Mughal nobility and laid the foundation for their future rise to prominence.

On January 10, 1711, Prime Azimushshan appointed Abdulla Khan his naib in the *suba* of Allahabad and Husain Ali Khan to the same post in the province of Azimabad Patna.

The rise of the Barha Syed brothers in Mughal politics was closely connected with the succession struggles that followed the death of Bahadur Shah I. Through the influence of Bahadur Shah's son- Prince Azimushshan, ultimately, the two brothers secured important appointments in the imperial administration and were entrusted with the governorships of Allahabad and Patna, respectively.

According to the narrative, the brothers had earlier enjoyed the patronage of Prince Azimushshan. Following that Prince's death, his son Farrukhsiyar, became a claimant to the Mughal throne. Encouraged by his mother, who is described in the account as a Hindu convert, Farrukhsiyar was advised to seek the support of the Barha brothers in order to challenge

his paternal uncle, Emperor Jahandar Shah, and recover what he regarded as his rightful inheritance.

With considerable financial resources at his disposal, Farrukhsiyar set out from Bengal toward Delhi. Upon reaching Patna, he attempted to establish contact with the brothers, particularly Syed Husain Ali Khan Barha, who had previously been associated with his father's faction. At that time, however, Husain Ali Khan was absent from Patna, being engaged in a campaign against rebellious zamindars in the surrounding region.

During his absence, Farrukhsiyar's mother succeeded in gaining access to the household of Husain Ali Khan and, more importantly, to his mother, a woman for whom the Sayed noble had the highest respect and affection. Through persistent appeals, she sought to persuade the Sayed family to support her son's claim to the throne.

According to the tradition, Husain Ali Khan's mother strongly believed that favours received in the past should be repaid with loyalty and assistance when circumstances demanded it. On this principle, she urged her son to support Farrukhsiyar in his struggle for the Mughal throne.

Husain Ali Khan, despite his deep respect for his mother, initially opposed the proposal. He pointed out the practical difficulties facing Farrukhsiyar's cause. The young prince, he argued, possessed neither a substantial army nor sufficient military resources. He lacked cavalry, artillery, and experienced commanders, and had only a few hundred followers in his camp. In Husain Ali Khan's view, it was unrealistic to imagine that such limited resources could successfully challenge Emperor Jahandar. Shah, the rightful reigning emperor of Hindustan.

Furthermore, both Barha Syed brothers were already serving under Jahandar Shah. The emperor had retained them in their offices and had not removed them from imperial service, despite having every opportunity to do so. That, in Husain Ali Khan's opinion, imposed a moral and political obligation upon them.

Nevertheless, the Syed matriarch remained steadfast in her position. Refusing to abandon her argument, she delivered a forceful response to her son, one that, according to the tradition, proved decisive in shaping the course of events that followed.

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