

**75 Days of Indian Revolution of
1857 Versus Jihad in Bijnor
(A Case Study from 13th
May to 28 July 1857)**

Vighnesh Kumar*

The news of the outbreak of Indian Revolution of 1857 reached Bijnor on 12th and it was public on 13th. The Europeans under the leadership of Mr. Alexander Shakespear tried to meet the challenge but had to quit the district. The authority was taken by Nawab Mahmud Khan whose lieutenants, soon, had turned the Revolution into the form of Jihad committing massacre of the general Hindus at several places starting from Dhampur. The Nawab had received the Royal Decree from the King of Delhi. Turning the whole episode into merely a Jihad, resulted into its reaction amongst the Hindus and on general appeal to safeguard the Hindus, the Chaudharis of the Bijnor District had to accept the challenge. They attacked on Nawab Mahmud Khan who had to flee from Bijnor to Najibabad. The Battle of

*** Professor and Head, Department of History, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh (India) E-mail: <vighneshkmr@gmail.com>**

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCES, Vol. 32, No. 3 (July-September), 2023
Peer Reviewed, Indexed & Refereed International Research Journal

Bijnor was followed by a number of battles fought at Sherkot, Haldaur and few more places. This paper covers the sketches of the incidents from 13th May to 28 July, 1857 i.e., a time bracket for 75 days.

[Keywords : Indian Revolution of 1857, *Jehad*, Ganga, Rohilkhand Division, Bijnor, Garhwal, Himalaya, Nainital, Bareilly, *District Gazetteer*, Shahbazpur Khader, Gujars, Katra *muhalla*]

Writing about the general features of the district of Bijnor, the District Gazetteer mentions :

“Bijnor, or more correctly Bijnaur, occupies the north-west corner of the Rohilkhand or Bareilly Division, and is a roughly triangular stretch of country with its apex to the north.”¹

In further records :

“The western boundary is formed throughout by the deep stream of river Ganga, beyond which lie the four districts of Dehradun, Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar and Meerut, all belonging to the Meerut Division. To the north and north-east is the hill country of Garhwal, the dividing line being the submontane road, which runs from Hardwar along the foot of the Himalayas to Ramnagar, Haldwani and Tanakpur... on the east, Phika river for the greater part of its course constitutes the boundary, separating this district from Naini Tal and Moradabad; as far as its junction with the Ramganga; and to the south lie the Thakurdwara, Amroha, and Hasanpur *tehsils* of Moradabad, the boundary being conventional and undetermined by natural features.”²

The district of Bijnor at the time of ‘Indian Revolution of 1857’ lied between latitude 29°2’ and 29°58’ north; and longitude between 78°0’ and 78°57’ east. It remained same until the post-independence period.

The distance between the district head-quarters of Bijnor and that of Meerut was a short distance of 40 miles but the information about the outbreak of Indian Revolution of 1857 reached Bijnor after 3 days *i.e.* on 13th May 1857. Its record is mentioned in the *District Gazetteer*. Under the heading “Beginning of the rebellion”, it finds space as follows :

“When, on the 13th of May 1857, run reached Bijnor, though only forty miles distant, of the calamitous outbreak at Meerut three days before, the European population of the district included Mr. A. Shakespear, the Collector, his wife and child;

Mr. G. Palmer, Joint Magistrate; Mr. R. Currie, a civilian on his way to the hills; Dr. Knight, the Civil Surgeon, and his wife; Mr. Lemaistre, the head clerk, his wife and three children; Mr. Johnson and Mr. Murphy, both clerks in the Magistrate's office, together with the latter's wife and four children, and a Mr. Cawood."³

It is a thing of no less interest that the *District Gazetteer* records the absence of military force as a fortune to the lives of the Europeans:

"There was, perhaps fortunately, no military force stationed in the district, the nearest posts being those at Meerut, Roorkee, Moradabad and Saharanpur."⁴

Getting information about the outbreak at Meerut, Mr. Alexander Shakespear, the Collector at once despatched hither some mounted police to ascertain the facts of the case. These policemen successfully established communication between Meerut and the police station at Bahsuma. The level of the Ganga was observed high so it was not easy to cross the Ganga without boats.

On 16th May, 1857 there took place a highway robbery followed by an open attack on the village of Shahbazpur Khader. To meet out the challenge, what measures were taken by the Collector has been described as follows:

"On the next day a servant of Mr. Currie was robbed close to the station [town of Bijnor] and there upon the Collector [Mr. Alexander Shakespear] sent requisitions for aid to the principal landholders, and called upon all native soldiers on leave in the district to come in aid and do service at Bijnor."⁵

The highway robbers belonged to the villages of Jhal and Olenda in the *pargana* of Daranagar being the Gujars. And so the Collector had summoned the prominent landlords who in return was responded immediately. It is described as follows:

"The summons met with an immediate response from the Chaudharis of Haldaur and Tajpur, while several non-commissioned officers and men of the Irregular Cavalry and other corps came in to assist the police force, to which considerable additions had been made"⁶

It is a point to note that the distance between Bijnor and Haldaur is 18 kms while that between Bijnor and Tajpur is 45 kms. In this context, naturally, Chaudhary of Haldaur's response was

supposed to be given prior to that of Chaudhary of Tajpur. But Alexander Shakespear was received immediate response from both the Chaudharis at the same time. Both the Chaudharis were taking the call to restore peace in general from robberies and violence amongst the villages concerned.⁷ Surely, they were not aware of the fact, what had been outbroken in the previous days at Meerut.

On the Collector's call good number of the non-commissioned officers and the cavalrymen of the Irregular Cavalry and other corps came in to assist the police force.⁸ At that juncture of time, thus considerable additions had been made in the force ready at hand at the district head-quarters of Bijnor.

Then occurred the episodes of 18th May, 1857 when a company of the 29th Native Infantry reached Bijnor from Saharamper passing through it to join their regiment at Moradabad.⁹ The terror observed had passed the same day and relief of their depiction was felt.¹⁰ Next day on 19th May some 300 Sappers and Miners came at Najibabad from Roorkee.¹¹ They started negotiations with Nawab Mahmud Khan, the grandson of Zabita Khan,¹² the ex Mir Bakshi of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II and son and successor of Najibuddaula.¹³

As per the records in the Government documents, Nawab Mahmud Khan was of some suspicion and was trying to change their minds. He played a game what has space in the *District Gazetteer* as follows :

“A new cause of alarm was arrival from Saharanpur on 18th of a company of the 29th N.I., passing through to join their regiment at Moradabad. Their departure was most opportune, for on the 19th of May some 300 Sappers and Miners, who had mutinied at Roorkee, reached Najibabad, and there opened negotiations with the self-styled Nawab, Mahmud Khan, the grandson of Zabita Khan.”¹⁴

It further records :

“The Nawab seems to have been anxious to avoid a disturbance at that place, but apparently, instigated the mutineers to attack Bijnor. News of their advent preceded them, and the Magistrate put his house in a state of defence; but the soldiers, who were short of ammunition, determined to make straight for Moradabad, hoping there to gain assistance from the disaffected 29th.”¹⁵

On 21st May, 1857 the jail was broken¹⁶ at Bijnor and this was a clear cut sign of the outbreak of the 'Revolution of 1857' in the district by the civilians. Alexander Shakespear and Mr. Palmer rallied the guard and had started killing those had came out. They chased them to the banks of the Ganga.¹⁷

All the treasure in form of silver coins of Rupee was a point of discussion for safety and as a result it was made safe from plunder by throwing it into the deep well adjoined the building of Treasury in the Collectorate campus of the district of Bijnor. It was hardly completed, a new terror arrived in form of Nawab Mahmud Khan who with empty carts had arrived from Najibabad to take away the treasure. He had words with influential Hindu landlords and had made them ready to resist the British and simultaneously to throw them and take their control over the district.

Finally on 7th June, the district administration was entrusted to Nawab Mahmud Khan after the refusal of Chaudhary Randhir Singh of Haldaur and Chaudhary Pratap Singh of Tajpur on the ground of their incapacity to carry on the administration.¹⁸

On some issues including those of Banke Rai, (Treasurer of Bijnor), Jamiyat Singh Brahman, *Rais* of Bijnor, the lady called 'Panna Patthar', the box of gold coins and jewelry; Chaudhary Nain Singh and Chaudhary Jodh Singh had turned in open opposition of the Nawab.¹⁹

In this context, what Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan records is worth mentioning :

"From the start of these events, Chaudhary Nain Singh and Chaudhary Jodh Singh, *Rais* of Bijnor determined to oppose the Nawab. They gathered men from the villages, thousands of villagers gathered in Bijnor. The Nawab wanted to pacify the Chaudharis. They both came to the Nawab's residence one evening to discuss the settlements, but this meeting did not take place. After their departure from the residence, the two Chaudharis came to the *Tehsil* to tell Sayyid Turab Ali *Tahsildar* and myself that they proposed to fight the Nawab and unseat him."²⁰

Actually the two Chaudharis were aware of the fact that Munir Khan *Jehadi* with his men in large number was ready to come to Bijnor. Naturally the Chaudharis were worried of his *Jehad*, the

religions war to which their ancestors had been suffering since last centuries.²¹

After the episodes of 'Munir Khan Jehadi', 'dispatching the treasury' and 'English officers' effect to Najibabad', 'the Petition to the King', 'Ahmad Khan Allah Khan's Tour', and 'Amdu Khan's departure for Delhi with a Petition'; Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan writes about Mareh Khan. Throwing light on his character, he writes :

"Mareh, a Sheikh by social class, was a confirmed bad character. Half the town of Sherkot was formerly in the zemindari of his forefathers.... he had become quite indigent and a blackguard besides. Chaudhary Partab Singh used to give his mother Rs. 150 a month. In March 1855, Mareh was sentenced to a year in jail, on a charge of bad behaviour, at the sessions of Mr. Charles John Wingfield."²²

Ahmad Allah Khan's meeting with Mareh Khan and the settlement between the two and Ahmad Allah Khan's arrival at Sherkot thrilled the Hindus at large. The sketch of the Hindus who had suffered at Mareh Khan's hands could be historically imagined as drowned in the famous Persian couplet that means :

*"We expected friendly gestures and treatment from our friends!
Whatever we thought was nothing but error."*²³

The joint strength of both the Khans accelerated the Jihad against the Hindus. The harsh treatment of the Hindus by the Jihadis became the thing of their daily routine. The bad memory of the treatment of the Hindus at large in the district particularly that had been done to them at Dhampur prevailed in their minds. Sir Sayyid, though in much limited and guarded words, thus records :

"All the Hindusunited to support Ahmed Allah Khan after he reached Dhampur. The Chaudharis of Sherkot also gave every evidence of their submission to the authority of Ahmed Allah Khan. On their coming to Dhampur on July 19, 1857, there Chaudharis met Ahmad Allah Khan in order to pay their respect to him. The landlords of Sherkot also cooperated with Ahmad Allah Khan. Each one of them was deeply concerned to ward off the anticipated danger from Mareh. At this time, however, Mareh was by no means weaker than Ahmad Allah Khan"²⁴

Nothing was in common between Ahmad Allah Khan and Mareh Khan except the feeling of *Jehad* or in other words on this point

nothing remained uncommon between the two. Again, using sugar coated words, what Sir Sayyid writes, is worth mentioning :

“Ahmad Allah Khan summed up in his bad character all that was wicked and violent. Nawab Mareh Khan Blackguard Bahadur was the very man who could still give him lessons in both these respects as his ally. Overnight the level of violence increased tenfold. Their special target became [all the infidels *i.e.*, the Hindus including their leaders] Chaudhari Umrao Singh, rated in the District as being very rich but also its weakest personage. Taking him as their ‘golden bird’, the two began to make trouble for the Chaudhari. A message was sent that his land revenue, about Rs. 12,000, should be paid at once. Mahmud Khan in Bijnor and Shafi Allah Khan and Azmat Allah Khan in Najibabad began to send soldiers, rations, *etc.* as war supplies to Ahmad Allah Khan. The artillery which had come from Nagina to Bijnor through the intercession of Nathe Khan was also sent, together with ammunition, to Sherkot, where it arrived on July 27.”²⁵

The sole aim of Ahmad Allah Khan, Mareh Khan, Mahmud Khan, Shafi Allah Khan, Azmat Allah Khan, Nathe Khan and the soldiers under them was shifted from anti-British to anti-infidels *i.e.* anti-Hindus. All of them were planning to destroy Hindus firstly by destroying their mighty ones in those days that only means their Hindu chieftains one by one. The number was of their “golden bird” Umrao Singh but this task was not an easy one in presence of Chaudhary Pratap Singh of Tajpur estate. The road distance between Sherrkot and Tajpur and that between Sherkot and Haldaur being less than 30 was a geographical fact, to which all the Jihadis were not fearless.²⁶

Till 27th day of July 1857, it was a crystal clear thing that the Hindus were being considered as the infidels (*kafirs*) and so were at the merciless target of the Muslim leadership in the name of Nawab Mahmud Khan. Prior to it, one week before, on 21st July the Royal Decree had been issued. It was issued by Emperor Bahadur Shah II Zafar appointing Nawab Mahmud Khan, as the Governor of Bijnor. It had been issued on 21st Zill Quadah, regnal year 28 that corresponds to 21st July, 1857.

This royal farman made *Jihadis* stronger day by day. Being aware of this fact, Ahmad Allah Khan had gone to Sherkot on 23rd July where Mareh Khan had greatly welcomed him. Thus, on this very

point of taking 1857 as merely tool of *Jehad*, "Indian Revolution of 1857", had been bitterly failed in the district of Bijnor. Right from the entry of Munir Khan *Jehadi* on 23rd June at Bijnor upto the arrival of Amdu Khan with the Royal Decree *i.e.* the Royal *farman* (dated 21 July, 1857) on 28 July, the District of Bijnor had been turned into the *Jehad* land.

As the target was to be fulfilled by destroying the Hindu chieftains one by one, the *Jehad* party, very cunningly, chose the soft target in Chaudhary Umrao Singh of Sherkot. They were apparently demanding from Sherkot. But war supplies, ammunition supply, rations' supply and soldiers' supply from all corners by all the Muslim leaders could not be kept longer a secret. Their secret was open now and so again the *Jehad* party, to make the Hindu chieftains uncorrelated, made a plan. According to that plan, the mightiest two Hindu Chieftains were to be pacified by sending emissaries to them by the Nawab. Again, on the same guarded lines in terms of both language and facts at this, Sayyid mentions:

"Although this affair concerned only Chaudhari Umrao Singh, Mahmud Khan and his advisors were quite fearful about the reactions of the Chaudharis of Haldaur and also of Chaudhari Pratap Singh, *Rais* of Tajpur [*Riyasat*], whom they viewed as a man who led a community and was responsible for the revenues of lands held in common. Mahmud Khan feared that they might intervene on Umrao Singh's behalf [*Golden Bird*]. To ward off this danger, on July 27 Mahmud Khan sent Nadir Shah Khan, Hasan Raza Khan, and Chaudhari Nain Singh and Chaudhari Jodh Singh, both *Rais-es* of Bijnor to Tajpur and Haldaur. Through these intermediaries, he appealed to the Chaudharis to intervene and bring about a compromise between Chaudhari Umrao Singh and himself."²⁷

The next day on 28th July, Mahmud Khan and party had the Royal Decree in hand and with the result of it, more pressure by Ahmad Allah Khan was made on Umrao Singh.²⁸ Writing under the title of "More pressure by Ahmad Allah Khan on Umrao Singh, and a Request for Lakhs of Rupees", Sayyid very intelligently uses the mild words "A Request...". He, further writes :

"On this very day, that is on July 28, the people who had set out for Bijnor to strive for a compromise, reached Tajpur. In Sherkot, meanwhile, Ahmad Allah Khan made such an

additional demand for payment of the outstanding debts that at first, the Chaudharis did promise something. When their offer was rejected they then agreed to give some cash, when this, too, proved unacceptable, they decided to give all the money in one lump sum. This money was taken from the village fortress on elephants. However, it was not brought to Ahmad Allah Khan, because they calculated that the money would be wasted as an effort to preserve the peace."²⁹

On the other hand, Chaudhary Umrao Singh, the 'golden bird' sent his paternal uncle Ghassa Singh to Ahmad Allah Khan with the message of peace who was arrested then and there.³⁰ Not only this, but Ahmad Allah Khan also besieged Chaudhary Umrao Singh in his *garhi* (village fortress). 400 soldiers were also there in the *garhi* of Sherkot. They were mostly musketeers. Ration and ammunition was also available in the Sherkot fortress.

Ahmad Allah Khan and Mareh Khan with their all the Jihadis attacked the Hindus, killed them brutally almost in a form of general massacre *i.e.*, genocide, the darkest shade of 1857. Non fighting Hindus, mostly the scheduled caste ones were their first target after that they aimed at the residence of Chaudhary Shivraj Singh and Lachman Singh, *zamindars* of Sherkot. The Jihadis were approaching the fortress.

Sir Sayyid, throwing light on that episode, writes :

"Ahmad Allah Khan fired his artillery at the residence of Chaudhary Shivraj Singh and Lachman Singh ... with the residents of the Kotra quarter, Mareh Khan joined in the attack at the same time."³¹

Actually Mareh Khan turned the local residents of Katra *muhalla* into *Jihadis* that had resulted in betrayal and at the same time into the destruction to their masters, the Chaudharis.

Thus, the 'Revolution of 1857', which had been started taking an oath on Ganga-water and the Qur'an was destroyed in Bijnor District fully and finally. The sentiment of *Jihad* destroyed it.³² About it a deposition presents a valuable evidence recorded in the '*Narrative of Events Regarding the Mutiny in India too*'.³³

Notes and References

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