

**Sketch of Mareh Khan Blackguard :
The Infamous Villain of 1857
(A Case Study upto 23rd
July, 1857)**

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Sheikh, Sayyid, Mughal and Pathan are the four categories of the Ashraf Muslims in Northern India. Their identity cannot be defined though each one has one's claim. In the context of Mareh Khan, it is necessary to find him a Sheikh for whom Mr. H. R. Nevill in his District Gazetteer of Bijnor mentions that "the Sheikh are of Hindu origin who being converts adopted the class of their proselytizers, the later being Sheikhs, who held the offices of "qazi" and "mufti". During the Indian Revolution of 1857 in the district of Bijnor, the Hindus; and the Muslims under the leadership of Nawab Mahmud Khan of Najibabad and his nephew Ahmad Allah Khan took oath not to have armed conflicts, between the two i.e. with Hindus, while fighting against the British. But Mareh Khan the blackguard and bad character of Sherkot started looting and killing Hindus, the

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infidels. He, supported by Ahmad Allah Khan, the Nawab's Nephew and newly appointed Joint Magistrate of Bijnor District started the Jihad jointly against Hindus which had caused the 'Revolution of 1857' a failure at the end.

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Sheikh, Sayyid, Mughal and Pathan are the four categories of the Ashraf Muslims in Northern India. Their identity cannot be defined though each one has one's own claim. This can be understood by the famous Persian couplet which may be translated as :

“Before the last year, I was a butcher, but became the Sheikh last year. If this year too, the prices of grain remain high, I will become a Sayyid”.

Going into deep is unnecessary. In the context of Mareh Khan, one of the most infamous villains of Bijnor during the most panically eventful days of Indian Revolution of 1857¹, it is necessary to find him a Sheikh.² Regarding it, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's words are of much value. About Mareh Khan, he writes :

“Mareh, a Sheikh by social class, was a confirmed bad character. Half the town of Sherkot was formerly in the *zamindari* of his forefathers. For this reason, he had been called 'Big Chaudhri'. However, over the years he had become quite indigent and a blackguard besides. Chaudhari Partab [Pratap] Singh used to give his mother Rs. 150 a month.”³

Giving a particular type of minute detail about his imprisonment in March 1855, he further mentions :

“In March 1855, Mareh was sentenced to a year in jail, on a charge of bad behaviour, at the sessions of Mr. Charles John Winfield.”

Writing about the 'Seikhs', in the *District Gazetteer*, Mr. H. R. Nevill mentions :

“The foremost place is taken by the Sheikhs, of whom there were 59,194 or 21.8 per cent. of whole Musalman population. They are most numerous in the Bijnor *tehsil*, where they far outnumber any other caste, while in Nagina and Dhampur the Julahas preponderate. There can be no doubt that the

great majority of the Sheikhs are of Hindu origin, and it has been suggested that the converts adopted the class of their proselytizers, the latter being Sheikhs, who held the offices of *qazi* and *mufti* in the various *parganas*, the conversion of infidels [the Hindus] being one of the principal duties of these functionaries.”⁴

He further mentions :

“And as the new followers of Islam styled themselves Sheikhs, so were they necessarily bound to enrol themselves in one of the recognized subdivisions of that tribe.”⁵

What a historically important remark he again puts is worth mentioning :

“Thus it comes about that their descendants are called by names which are of Arabian origin and were derived from the founders of the *Khalifate*. The great majority describe themselves as Qureshis, these numbering 30,962 and predominating in every tehsil and next to them come Siddiqis, 19005.”⁶

Mentioning under the heading of “Sherkot, *paragana* and *tehsil* of Dhampur”, the *District Gazetteer* records :

“This large and straggling town stands on the high left bank of the Khoh, in 29° 16' N. and 78° 34' E., at a distance of four miles north-east from Dhampur and 23 miles by road from the district headquarters. Through it passes the road from Dhampur to Afzalgarh, crossing the river by a ferry, while others lead to Nagina on the north-west and to Kashipur on the east...In 1844, the tehsil headquarters were removed to Dhampur and Sherkot lost much of its importance.”⁷

The word ‘Sherkot’ is considered to derive its name from Sher Shah.⁸ During Sher Shah’s reign, it was the headquarters of the *paragana* of same name whose this administrative status was kept untouched by Akbar too.⁹

It further records :

“During the mutiny it was the scene of many struggle between loyal Hindus and rebel Musalmans, suffering greatly at the hands of the notorious Mareh Khan.”

Sketching the then Chaudhary family of Sherkot in 1908, H. R. Nevill remarks¹⁰:

“The principal family is that of the Chaudharis, now represented by Rai Ranjit Singh Bahadur, whose palatial house, with two Hindu temples attached, stands just outside the town to the north-west. Part of the town is known as Qazi Sarai, and derives the name from a well known family of Sheikhs, who held the office of *Qazi* under the Mughals....

---The place comprises eight muhallas, of which three, known as Sherkot Khas, Faridnagar or Qila, and Kotra, form the central portion. The remainder lies at some distance from these and from each other and comprise Taibyab Sarai and Khurana on the south, and Rambari, Samna Sarai and Nondna to the north and east. The chief *bazars* are in Kotra and Sherkot, the former being a wide brick-paved roadway standing on high ground and flanked by good shops; while the latter is a long, irregular and narrow street in which two carts could with difficulty pass one another.

The market days are Sunday and Thursday in each week, both in Kotra and Sherkot Khas; a fair of no great importance is held during August in honour of Zahir Diwan.”

Throwing light on Dhampur *pargana*, the *District Gazetteer* further mentions :

“The *pargana* was formerly known as Sherkot, and is mentioned under this name in the *Ain-i Akbari*. The *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* records the fact that it was held by one Mir Abdul Fateh, but the identity of this person cannot be discovered. When seized by the Rohillas in 1748, it was the feef of Safdar Jang, and was apparently known at that time both as ‘Dhampur and Sherkot’. The name was finally changed to Dhampur on the removal of the *tehsil* headquarters to that place in 1844.”¹¹

In the night between June 6-7, 1857; Mr. Alexander Shakespear, the Magistrate and Collector handed over the District Administration to Mahmud Khan *vide* the letter being reproduced as below :

“Since the administration is, in fact, entrusted to you for as long as the Government may wish, you must administer it well and must also effectively protect the personal properties of the Collector and the Joint Magistrate that are in residence, and all the property, effects, and government offices. Dated June 7, 1857.”¹²

This letter was handed over to Nawab Mahmud Khan. Taking the letter Mahmud Khan at once came out of the office.

Next day, Mahmud Khan made new appointments as follows :

“Azmat Allah Khan, *Munsif* of Thakundwara was appointed as Nawab’s Deputy, Ahmad Allah Khan, the *Tehsildar* at Najibabad was appointed as Deputy Collector and Joint Magistrate.”¹³

Ahmed Khan was entrusted to control the land revenue and the court. Ahmad Yar Khan *alias* Kallan Khan was arisen to Commander-in-Chief of the Army, while Habib Allah Khan was made its Paymaster. All the office holders of Nawab’s family were appointed to on their old posts.

On June 17, 1857; just after 10 days in his office, Nawab Mahmud Khan signed two important documents. One was sent to *Rais* of Tajpur addressing him, “Illustrious and worthy friend Chaudhari Partab Singh”¹⁴, and the other was the “Dismissal of Maulvi Qadir Ali as *Tehsildar* of Nagina”¹⁵. Actually, he had appointed his “dear and respected brother” Muhammed Abd Allah Khan on that post.

Making the arrangements for the administration of the Bijnor District, the Nawab was planning to send the treasure to Najibabad. At this point Chaudhary Nain Singh and Chaudhary Jodh Singh determined to oppose him. Meanwhile, one Munir Khan *Jehadi’s* sudden arrival with 400 *jehadis* made the situation suspicious and as a result, the peace between the Chaudharies and the Nawab was a necessity of the time. Ahmad Allah Khan played an important role as intermediary. An eyewitness of most of the events records it as follows¹⁶ :

“Arrival of Munir Khan *Jehadi* : Talks between the Nawab and the Chaudharies” - “This emergency had not yet arisen when one Munir Khan, a resident of Kunjpura, suddenly came to Bijnor from Nagina; he came as a *Jehadi* [a religious warrior] leading a party of 400 men. Upon receiving word of trouble, Ahmad Allah Khan who had gone to Najibabad, came to Bijnor, Ahmad Yar Khan *alias* Kallan Khan, Commander-in-Chief, and Nadir Shah Khan, *Risaldar*, on leave from the Multan Regiment who had come to Bijnor, intervened and brought peace between the Chaudharis and the Nawab. On June 23, 1857 Ahmad Allah Khan and the two Chaudharies came to the *Cutcherry* [Court] for a long

discussion. Afterwards peace prevailed. The two Chaudharis swore by Ganges water that they would obey the Nawab; Ahmad Allah Khan put a seal on the *Qur'an* that he would not mistreat the Chaudharis. For this part, Mahmud Khan and Ahmad Allah Khan put a seal on the *Qur'an* at the Residence, which they then handed over. Thus there was peace between the two sides. It was agreed on June 24, 1857 to take Rs. 4,000 from Banke Rai, Treasurer, together with the box belonging to Mr. George Palmer, which had been left in trust. At the same time, the guard was lifted from the house of the treasurer".

Meanwhile, the news of the Royal Decree issued by Bahadur Shah II to Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly reached Bijnor. It was in this that Khan Bahadur Khan had obtained the Royal Decree to administer the entire region of Katehar. If so, it was an alarming news to those of Bijnor as this tract had been a part of Katehar.

"After consultation, it was proposed to send a draft petition to the King in Delhi to request that the District should be conferred upon Mahmud Khan by name. A draft was prepared which was to be taken to Delhi by Amdu Khan."¹⁷

On July 10th, Ahmad Allah Khan marched out of Bijnor towards Najibabad. On 13th, he reached Najibabad from Nagina. He reached Dhampur on 14th. He was firm to exercise his judicial powers in order to inflict a fine on Imam Bakhsh. This Imam Bakhsh was popularly known as 'Mareh Khan' who had been stealing all along from Roop Chand Mahajan. But the Blackguard named Mareh Khan was cunning and clever enough and had prepared his war supplies and gathered his men to oppose Ahmad Allah Khan's authority. He stayed in Sherkot on the alert. Knowing about Mareh Khan's preparedness, Ahmad Allah Khan tarried for several days in Dhampur.

After his arrival at Dhampur, mostly all the Hindus and Muslims had united to support Ahmad Allah Khan. Chaudharis and landlords of Sherkot met him and had given every evidence of their submission to his authority.

The Hindu inhabitants of Sherkot were feeling a ray of hope in the newly appointed Deputy Collector and Joint Magistrate Ahmad Allah Khan's arrival at Dhampur and were eagerly waiting to welcome his arrival at Sherkot.¹⁸

But it was the feeling of the *Jihad* and surely not any compulsion, that changed his fowl mind. He, who had taken on oath few days back putting a seal on the *Qur'an* was suddenly taking the

opposite side. It was none but the same Ahmad Allah Khan who had decided to extract money from the Hindus, attacking and killing the Hindus, the infidels alongwith the Blackguard Mareh Khan in joint operations against the *Kafirs*. Under the heading - "Ahmad Allah Khan in Sherkot", throwing light on this episode, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan writes :

"Ahmad Allah Khan went to Serkot on July 23; there Mareh welcomed him and gave a feast for him and his camp. Ahmad Allah Khan settled Rs. 100 a month on Mareh, and put him in charge of mobilizing men and laying up grain for the camp. Those people who had suffered at Mareh's hands - when they saw fortune smile upon him and the tide turn against themselves, they wept and said [quoting a Persian verse]:

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

It is interesting to note that one *tehsildar* posted at Najibabad was discussed by his cousin who was there at Collectorate at Bijnor when Mr. Francis Shester,¹⁹ a native of Saradhana was there on 29th March, 1857.²⁰ In his deposition to Major G.W. Williams,²¹ the then Superintendent of Cantonment Police, N.W.P. that a cousin of *Tehsildar* of Najibabad to whom the *chupprassie* was calling in 'Nawab' was hostile in talking about the Europeans calling them *Kafirs*²² because they had polluted the Islam.

Notes and References

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