

## **Background and Consequences of the Second Battle of Sherkot (A Case Study of ‘Indian Revolution of 1857 versus Jihad’ in Bijnor District)**

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*Bijnor has been the only district of the then India which had been under the control of Indians from 6-7 June 1857 to the next more than ten months. During this period, the East India Company was totally out of the scene there. But due to the Jihad sentiments and the atrocities committed to the Hindus by the Nawab's administration, the scenario was to be changed. The First Battle of Sherkot proved the Jihad its cruel nature against the Hindus and so the Second Battle of Sherkot was fought under the leadership of Chaudhary Pratap Singh, the headman of Tyagi Riyasat of Tajpur. All the Hindu chieftains of the district were united under his flag and Nawab Mahmud Khan's men- Ahmad Allah, Mareh Khan, Shafi Allah Khan and others were resisted, attacked and defeated. In the last, Nawab himself*

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*was attacked at Bijnor and was bitterly defeated by the Hindu chieftains who had to flee for his life.*

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In the light of facts relating to the outbreak of “Indian Revolution of 1857”<sup>1</sup> on Sunday, May 10, 1857 at Meerut,<sup>2</sup> an example of a conversation at the *verandah* of the Bijnor Collectorate on 29<sup>th</sup> March held between Fransis Shester and a ‘so called Nawab’ is witnessed. Its fairly good record is maintained in the ‘Deposition No. 1’ taken at Meerut in 1858 by Major G.W. Williams, the then Superintendent of Cantonment Police, North-Western Provinces.<sup>3</sup>

In the faithful reproduction of the “*Mutiny Narratives*” titled as ‘1857 IN 1857 : *Original Mutiny Narratives*’, the editor records<sup>4</sup> :

“On the 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1857, I was at Bijnour, and went to pay my respects to the Collector and Magistrate of the district; whilst waiting in the *verandah*, a native, whom the *chupprassie* called Nawab, also came; I heard he had a brother, who was a *tehseeldar* in the district; a *jemadar* in the Canal Department was present; we were all seated. The Nawab commenced the conversation by observing that two regiments to the eastward had taken their discharge, because the *kafirs* [means British] had mixed pigs’ and cows’ fat with the new cartridges, that the *kafirs* had determined to take away the castes of all Mahomedans and Hindoos, and that these infidels [means the English] should not remain in India, or there would be no difference between Mahomedans and Hindoos, and whatever they said we should have to do.”

Fransis Shester also tells in his ‘Deposition’ that “the Nawab was about thirty-five years age, slightly built, but the *jemadar* was a powerful man.”<sup>5</sup>

In conversation what the so called Nawab had replied to his comment, Shester tells<sup>6</sup> :

“The Nawab answered, what ease have we, they [the English] are always inventing new laws to trouble us, and to overturn religion, teach out of their religious books, which are also distributed; is there now any security for Islam, as it used to be?”

The questions and the worries raised in the last words present the glimpses what was their main concern in those days in the minds of those people who, on June 7, 1857, were entrusted the district of Bijnor by both the "Company's higher officials" as well as the "Chaudharies", the prominent Hindus chieftains of the district.<sup>7</sup>

It is interesting to note that the so called Nawab seems to be the very Shafi Allah Khan whose elder brother Ahmad Allah Khan was the *tehsildar* of Najibabad during 1857. Both the real brothers were the nephews of Nawab Mahmud Khan to whom on June 7, 1857 in the very early hours of the date, Collector and Magistrate Mr. Alexander Shakespear handed the charge over to.

Just after 2 hours Nawab Mahmud Khan's following declaration was heard before the Sun-rising in the city's streets<sup>8</sup> :

*"Khalq Khuda ka, Mulk Badshah ka,  
Huqum Nawab Mahmud Khan Bahadur ka."*

From the very beginning there was a rift between the Nawab and the Chaudharies – Nain Singh and Jodh Singh of Bijnor. Nawab Mahmud Khan's nephew Ahmad Allah Khan settled the terms putting the seal on the *Qur'an* for fidelity and thus he remained successful in gaining Chaudharies' trust.

Then he took both the Chaudharies to the Residence of Mahmud Khan at Bijnor and there both, the Nawab and he himself putting seal on the *Qur'an*, took oath not to breach the mutual trust.<sup>9</sup> From that very moment, due to the efforts made by Ahmad Allah Khan, Chaudhary Nain Singh and Chaudhary Jodh Singh became loyal to Nawab in his efforts against the Company's rule.<sup>10</sup>

Assuming the charge of Bijnor District in the night of 6-7 June, 1857; Nawab Mahmud Khan, made new appointments. Ahmad Allah Khan, his nephew and the then *tehsildar* of Najibabad was made Joint Magistrate and with this high office, he was, made direct responsible for district administration.<sup>11</sup> Really he was the most efficient officer of the Nawab's regime during Indian Revolution of 1857. The Chaudharies could be taken into terms to the Nawab by his efforts. The Hindu chieftains having suspicion on Nawab's malafide and bad intensions towards the Hindus could be thus removed. From 7<sup>th</sup> June, 1857 to the day when the Battle of Nagina fought on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 1858; he was the most trusted person for the Nawab. For this time-bracket of ten mouths and a half, the district of Bijnor was under the control of Nawab Mahmud Khan and his most trusted nephew Ahmad Allah Khan.<sup>12</sup>

On 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1857 Ahmad Allah Khan attacked on the *garhi* of Sherkot.<sup>13</sup> His lieutenant *Sheikh* Imam Bakh *alias* Mareh Khan started looting and killing the Hindus with his consent. They finally captured it. It was the First Battle of Sherkot. Ahmad Allah Khan celebrated the victory.

The Chaudharies of the district of Bijnor became alert. The feeling of the *Jehad* in the minds of Nawab's officials was then not a secret. Ahmad Allah Khan and *Sheikh* Mareh Khan, the Blackguard had a fool proof planning to extract money from the Hindus. Harassing, looting and killing the Hindus became a routine. The victims were appealing the Hindu chieftains of the district. The oath taken by Ahmad Allah Khan and again along with Nawab Mahmud Khan putting seal on the *Qur'an* was a thing of bygone days. There was an urgent call to take a notice of the Sherkot episode and so the Chaudharies of the district were assembled to take a firm decision. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, in his book under the heading—"The Chaudharies Ready to Resist Ahmad Allah Khan", thus remarks<sup>14</sup> :

"The Chaudharies [Hindu chieftains] held a round of discussions amongst themselves, in view of their overriding concern at this heavy blow against one of the leading men of the District. With one voice, they agreed to make an effort to take back the fortress from Ahmad Allah Khan and to mobilize their men at Dhampur. On July 31, 1857 the following leaders banded together: Chaudhary Randhir Singh and Chaudhary Budh Singh, *Rais-es* of Haldaur, with two artillery pieces; Chaudhary Partab Singh with a *jezail*; and the Chaudhary of Kanth with an artillery piece. In one village after another, the drums were sounded to mobilize the population; this call to mobilize was heard everywhere in the District. As hostages for Ghassa Singh and Basant Singh; the Chaudharies seized Nadir Shah Khan, Hasan Raza Khan, and Sabit Ali Khan, who were relatives of Mahmud Khan and his agents at Dhampur. At the same time they killed two *sowars* of the Nawab."

As the Hindu chieftains took the notice of the undeclared *Jehad* of the Nawab party, they gathered and had taken the decision to take the arms up against their oppressor, the Nawab's Administration.

In the meantime a signed letter of Mahmud Khan was captured.<sup>15</sup> It was sent to Ahmad Allah Khan from Bijnor on 31<sup>st</sup> July, the same day of holding the council of the Chaudharies—the Hindu chieftains of Bijnor and one of Kanth in Moradabad District. This

council was called by Chaudhary Pratap Singh of Raja ka Tajpur. One more such letter of Azmat Allah Khan was also seized by the Chaudharies.<sup>16</sup> It was written at Najibabad. Both the letters were written to same Ahmad Allah Khan in which intention of harassing the Hindus for extracting money from them was a crystal clear thing.<sup>17</sup>

Describing the resistance of the Hindu Chaudharies to the infamous *Jehad* party of Nawab Mahmud Khan's administration, Sir Sayyid further remarks<sup>18</sup> :

"The Nawab was in a tight corner as a result of this [Hindu chieftains means the Chaudharies] mobilization. His men were being seized and killed wherever they went. Some of his soldiers were killed in the village of Nangal. Some of his letters that had been dispatched to Ahmed Allah Khan were also taken. I saw in Chaudhary Umrao Singh's possession an authentic letter sent by Mahmud Khan from Bijnor, and another equally authentic letter of Azmat Allah Khan."

This is what should be taken as the background of the Second Battle of Sherkot. Both the letters mentioned above seized by the Hindu chieftains from which they were not unable to draw the image for what Nawab was dealing with. The *Jehad* party active under Mareh Khan was initiating and accelerating the undeclared *Jehad*. One more interesting evidence about this *Jehad* mobilization lies in fact that Nawab's nephew and Joint Magistrate Ahmad Allah Khan had already fixed Rs. 100 per month for Mareh Khan while assigning the duty of mobilizing men [?] means mobilizing men for fighting without salaries *i.e.*, the *Jehad* against the Hindus to whom those were looting, killing, kidnapping, harassing and insulting by all means. That particular *Jehad* was not against the British because no European was then present there in whole of the district.

Sir Sayyid is not wrong in his comments that there had been no Hindu-Muslim conflict earlier in Bijnor. His comment is worth seeing<sup>19</sup> :

"Before this fighting there had never been a dispute, nor feelings of hatred, nor even a religious altercation, between Hindus and Muslims of this District. On the contrary, Muslim servants prevailed in numbers in the houses of the Chaudharies."

Throwing light again, he further writes<sup>20</sup> :

"However in this fighting, the growth of hatred between Hindus and Muslims became more and more unavoidable."

Sir Sayyid, thus, in his writing, may be wrong in perception but surely he is not wrong in his argument. Again, one of the most remarkable comment, he makes<sup>21</sup> :

“On the one side there was the group of Hindu leaders, while there was the group of Muslim leaders on the other side.”

Sir Sayyid, certainly by using his farsightedness about the Narrative, gives space to Nawab and Ahmad Allah Khan's *Jehad* party. He 'no and never' uses the actual ground reality and hid the bare truth of both the *Jehad* and the *Jehadis*. He never shows the fact that Mareh Khan was assigned Rs. 100 per month to mobilize men and material, where the men were to be mobilized from? The answer is clear and that lies in the call for *Jehad* which Mareh Khan did well. The Hindus were looted, their women folk raped and kidnapped and even killed- was the simple outcome of Mareh Khan's activism. The poor Hindus' appeal worked and the Hindu chieftains gathered under the leadership of Chaudhary Pratap [Partab in original sources] Singh of Raja ka Tajpur.<sup>22</sup> On his call, the Bisnoi leader, the Chaudhary of Kanth came and joined<sup>23</sup> alongwith Chandlay Randhir Singh of Haldaur<sup>24</sup>, whose real maternal uncle was Chaudhary Shivraj Singh of Sherkot whose wife and daughter-in-law were also killed in the undeclared *Jehad* at Sherkot.

Combined forces of the Hindu front thus evolved against the *Jehad* party of Nawab Mahmud Khan attacked Ahmad Allah Khan and besieged him in the fortress of Sherkot.<sup>25</sup> And with this, the Second Battle of Sherkot started. Nawab's nephew and the real leader of the Nawab's *Jehad* party Ahmad Allah Khan was utterly defeated in the ancestral garhi of Chaudhary Umrao Singh, the owner of the Sherkot *garhi*.

Ahmad Allah Khan, finding no option left, escaped from the Sherkot fortress in the dark of night and did not stop until reaching Najibabad.<sup>26</sup> In whole of the district of Bijnor, the *Jehad* victims were shown wide sympathy and with the result, Nawab's men were being beaten<sup>27</sup> in whole of the country side. Even in the city of Bijnor, Nawab was attacked on August 6, 1857<sup>28</sup> in which he had to flee. His eldest son Ghaznafar Ali Khan had to flee bare footed.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, it was the 'Second Battle of Sherkot', that resulted into a comma for the Nawab's *Jehad* party under Ahmad Allah Khan due to the united force of the Hindu Chieftains who had come forward to save their co-religious innocent brethren from the inhumane atrocities done to them by the Nawab's administration during their

undeclared *Jehad* against the Hindus. It was the very thing to which *tehsildar* Ahmad Allah Khan's brother Shafi Allah Khan had answered to Fransis Shester on 29<sup>th</sup> March, 1857 at the Collectorate's *varandah*.<sup>30</sup> This also gave a set back to the movement and so the momentum of Indian Revolution of 1857 in Rohilkhand Division in general and in Bijnor District in particular was broken fully and finally. The feeling of the *Jehad* destroyed the movement of 1857 though the Nawab in beginning had taken oath putting seal on the *Qur'an*. All the good virtues and things to resist the East India Company proved fake except the *Jehad* – the contemporary sources hesitatingly show if handled with care.

The definition of '*kafirs*' had been changed to what was in Shafi Allah Khan's conversation. The same Shafi Allah Khan who on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1857 was enbracketing the English people as "*kafirs*"<sup>31</sup> had been changed then, as for him the Hindus had become then the '*kafirs*'. It was change in definition of '*Kafirs*'. Sir Sayyid, on this very perception, thus remarks<sup>32</sup> :

"Ahmad Allah Khan and Shafi Allah Khan continued with their evil ways. They continued to harass the Hindus and to loot and set afire to the villages in the environs of Najibabad."

On the atrocities done to the Hindus in general and to the Jats in particular, the following words of Sir Sayyid present a glimpse of what had been done to the innocent poor Hindus<sup>33</sup> :

"Shafi Allah Khan, for example, burned down the village of Musapur. Mareh Khan and Abdullah Khan (whom the Nawab had appointed *tehsildar* of Nagina after dismissing Maulvi Qadir Ali *Tehsildar*) looted and set afire Hasanpura, Mohanpura, Shafiabad, Kardili, Narayanpur, and Pattijatan-all villages inhabited by Jats."

Playing the victim card by the Muslims who had come to Najibabad shouting, worked in full measure. The Nawab cleverly again took the advantage. On this episode, Sir Sayyid, in his *Tarikh-i-Sarkashi-i-Zila Bijnor* throws some light, though in very much guarded language. It is as follows<sup>34</sup> :

"The Nawab took clever advantage of this development to group his forces [of *Jehad* soldiers without salaries]. He told the people :

"Look what the Hindus have done to the Muslims : all the Muslims ought to come together to kill the Hindus."

Ahmad Allah Khan made use of such slogans. He took out his artillery, sent his army, and also raised the Mahammadi flag on August 22, 1857 A.D., *Muharram* 1, 1274 A. H., at Jalalabad near Najibabad. A large force came together, since many Muslims were ready to fight a religious war [i.e., the *Jihad*] to kill the Hindus."

General declaration of the *Jihad* by same Ahmad Allah Khan who had taken oath putting seal on the *Qur'an* was a fact now open to the Hindus. The Nawab also followed his nephew and now for the first time openly declared *Jihad* to kill the Hindus. Nawab Mahmud Khan had forgotten his oath putting seal on the *Qur'an* before the Chaudharies in reply of their oath taken putting holy Ganga-water on palms; and had declared publically the *Jihad* as was recorded by Sir Sayyid<sup>35</sup>:

"The Nawab saw...He raised the Muhammadi flag; at once violence [of *Jihad* against the Hindus] was set afoot, and Religions war [i.e., *Jihad*] was established in the District."

There is an example when Inayat Ali Khan, *Qazi of Khera*, attacked the post of Mujahidpur, where he had shown his character full of *Jihad* in both motivation and execution, even then Dalel Singh Gujar neither could take a lesson nor resented. In Sir Sayyid's words<sup>36</sup> :

"Inayat Ali Khan, Qazi of Khera, attacked the post of Mujahidpur, where he captured two Hindu peons. One he killed; the other he "converted" to Islam. In the same way *Qazi* Inayat Ali and Dalel Singh Gujar and Hasan Raza called Chattan, accompanied by two artillery pieces and 2,000 men, attacked Miranpur, where they looted the Police Station and some shops. They also killed some men and proclaimed by beat of drums the name of Mahmud Khan before running off to come back."

Shafi Allah Khan, after his victory at the Battle of Pamrawali fought against the combined Hindu force, became famous. Writing about it, Sir Sayyid mentions<sup>37</sup> :

"Chaudhari Budh Singh and Chaudhari Maharaj Singh decided to fight the Nawab once more. They wrote letters to the brotherhood and asked Chaudhari Partab Singh [Tyagi] for help too. They mobilized at the village of Pheona. Those who assembled... Upon getting word of their advance, Ahmad Allah Khan sent some men, under the command of Shafi Allah Khan,



from Nagina and from Kiratpur. ...This victory made Shafi Allah Khan famous. He won the title of “Bahadur” [brave one]; he also began to be called ‘The Brave General’. Accordingly, this title of his is seen in most of the documents.”

## Notes and References

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17. *Ibid.*
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