

The Revolt of 1857 and the Role of Wahabees and Ferazees

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The revolt of 1857 is a complex phenomenon in the history of resistance against the colonial government. It involved larger parts of Northern India, the Deccan and some parts of Eastern India. It is an event that had drawn the attention of the historians, administrators, colonialists and the travelers from their own perspective. Among the travelogues one should mention *Tirthabhraman* (in Bengali) of Jadunath Sarbadhikari¹ who wrote an account of mutiny in course of his journey from Gangetic plain to upper India. V.D. Savarkar was the first Indian who described the event of 1857 as a “first war of Independence”². John William Keya³ and Malleson⁴ termed it as Sepoy Mutiny. According to R.C. Mazumdar⁵ the revolt was not a national rising of the Indian people but it had a mixed character. S.N.Sen has presented a balanced analysis in his book “Eighteen Fifty Seven”⁶. According to him the movement started as military insurrection but it was nowhere only confined to army. The first initiative to characterise the revolt of 1857 as a mass upsurge may be substantiated from the *Narrative of Events of 1857-58* (published from the Foreign Department Press, Calcutta). Eric Stokes⁷ described it as peasant uprising. Rudrangshu Mukherjee⁸ and Tapti Roy⁹ also characterized it as a popular uprising. But the debates continued even today whether we should call it merely a mutiny or military insurrection, war of religion, first war of independence or its leanings towards the mobilization of peasantry.

But so far as the present paper is concerned it would be worthwhile to mention the role of the Wahabis and Ferazees particularly in Bengal and Bihar. Historians always have ignored the role of Wahabis and Ferazees in their discussion. Even the historians like William Dalrymple in his work did not mention the participation of different religious group including the Hindus and Muslims.

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But in this context we should refer to the works of Narahari Kaviraj¹⁰ and Qeyamuiddin Ahmed¹¹ who had mentioned how the Wahabis and Ferazees of Eastern Bengal particularly Jessore, Khulna, Bakharganj and other parts of lower Bengal had maintained there close link with the sepoys of Patna and other parts of Bihar. Benoy Bhusan Chowdhury¹² and Hridaynath Mazumdar¹³ also mentioned about the participation of Ferazees and Wahabis in the revolt of 1857. Recently Ananda Bhattacharya also discussed in his works¹⁴ about the active participation of Wahabis and Ferazees in the revolt of 1857, though the possible role of Wahabis in espousing the concept of independence has been questioned . In this context about the participation of the Muslims in comparison with the Hindus to restore their own Raj needs some explanation. In a documentary telecasted by B.B.C-1 on 7th January 2008 in which suggested that the revolt of 1857 was motivated, organized and fought by the Jihadi Muslims of India. Thomas Lowe, a contemporary British chronicler wrote in 1860-“The infanticide Rajput, the bigoted Brahmin, the fanatic Musalmans had joined together in the cause, cow killer, cow worshiper, the pig hater and pig eater had revolted together.” Even the recent historians are of opinion that the revolt of 1857 was essentially a revolt of the partnership (Hindus and Muslims). Hunter has shown that large majority of Muslims of Bengal, particularly after the expulsion of Nawab Wajed Ali Shah of Oudh to Calcutta rose in arms and created a sense of alarm and panic in Bengal that there was an excitement among the sepoys of Bengal army working in different cantonments and barracks viz. Dum Dum, Barrackpore, Berahampore and also the sepoys of 34th N.I stationed at Chittagong and 73rd N.I. at Jalpaiguri¹⁵. The Wahabis and Ferazees of Barasat and Basirhat subdivision launched their campaign against the colonial oppression and shared their views with sepoys. Rai Taraknath Sen , Addl. Sadar Amin of 24 parganas reports, “that the sepoys used to conceal their secret letters under the sleeper of the shoes which they used to supply to the Ferazees and Wahabees. Barabazar, a centrally located place, was also a major stronghold of the sepoys who were coming from Upper India¹⁶. One point should be noted in this context that the disbanded sepoys of Upper India took their road for coming to Bengal with a view to joining with the disbanded and disgruntled sepoys. This explains why the arms were sold so rapidly in different places of Calcutta. It may be surmised that the sepoys were a major purchaser of those arms. The Wahabis and

Ferazees took the support of local Zaminders for commencing attack upon the Company's Government. The report of *The Bengal Hurkaru* dated 15th September 1857 informed us that five thousand Muslims of Barasat and Basirhat sub-division mobilized the local people under green flag and established their control in those regions. The movement and gradual success of the sepoys rapidly influenced the sepoys of the adjoining places of Howrah district for bringing about an attack upon the machinery of British Govt. The rapid success of the sepoys created such an alarming sensation upon the minds of the British officials that the latter took retaliatory measures as counter attack for dispelling the sepoys. As a consequence, few of them were arrested. The concealed arms and ammunitions were recovered from Barrackpore and its adjoining places. Even the suspected and arrested sepoys were sent to Calcutta for proper investigation. Special measures were taken so that they could not make any contact with the deposed Nawab Wajed Ali Shah and his adherents. The indomitable sprit of the mutinous sepoys placed them in such an advantageous position that they killed some European officials¹⁷.

The Ferazees who had no love for the British Government and cherished the restoration of Muhammedan power, were enthused by the event of 1857. This is evidenced in a number of letters which were received by the government. On 8th July the daroga of Thakurgaon thana, in the district of Dinajpur, reported that he had received a letter from Iswar Chandra Sen, a master of the Government school at Mathurapur, stating that the new Mussalmans or the Ferazees had removed their children from the school and that the Ferazee Moulavie and others of the sect had given out that the government were about to make Christians of the children by compelling them to eat pig. They recommended to their parents to remove their children at once. In consequence many of the boys had left and the school was nearly broken up¹⁸. On 7th July 1857, the District Magistrate of Jessore informed the Commissioner of Nadia Division, of a vernacular document, said to be "very much in the style of the ordinary preaching of the Farazi Moulvis". It was circulated among the Mussalman population of Jhingurgacha by one Mahomed Ali, a Jamadar of police. Among other things the document contained the following lines: "The day of judgment is approaching". In 1270 B.S. suddenly there will be a violent storm and rain. All (men) having got wealth some will die and others will be shut up at the north

gate..... From that year the words of the Koran will be exalted. Nobody will attend to the justice of the rulers. Mohamed desires it, and there will be good order¹⁹”

In certain parts of Lower Bengal, particularly in the districts of Dacca, Faridpur, Dinajpur and Bakharganj, the Fakir emissaries of the mutineers found a fertile field for their activity. The Joint Magistrate of Faridpur in a report to the Government stated that an anonymous petition had been presented stating that the Ferazees in a body were rising and had written to the sepoy for support. The intention of the Ferazees to rise in support of mutineers is again confirmed in another anonymous petition addressed to the Governor General of India. The petitioners sent a list of names of Dudhu Miyan’s followers’ including that of his son-in-law and warned the Government that though Dudhu Miyan was in jail, his followers had become restive and they might create troubles²⁰. The local authorities received another petition from one Gyabullah, from Dacca dated 8th Bhadra 1264 B.S. in which the petitioner affirmed that he had knowledge of a secret meeting between two Hindustani and some of the Ferazee Khalifas, and suggested that unless these Khalifas were detained, they might, in league with the sepoy, create a disturbance in the district of Dacca and Bakharganj²¹. Another petition from “a faithful and loyal servant of the Government” stated that Dudhu Miyan, who was detained in jail, had his followers, the Ferazees, “a number not less than the swarm of ants”. He also told that these persons were involved in a conspiracy to avenge the ill treatment of their superior by attacking the officers of the station, and plundering the treasury of the collectorate²². Dacca with its Muhammedan population caused much anxiety to the government as deep suspicions were entertained about the mutinous conduct of the sepoy of the 73 Regiment, which had been stationed there. Brennand, the principal of Dacca College, wrote on 1st June 1857, “The men are very civil, but with the example of their *bhaibuns* before us we can not put much trust in them.²³” The tie-up and friendship between the sepoy and the Ferazees was also found among the sepoy of Barrackpore, Dum Dum, Berhampore and Dacca that they refused to accept the greased cartridges and were also apprehensive about losing their religion and caste. The rebellious mind and mentality struck their mentality in such a way that a war of religion in the form of a reigning crusade was inevitable²⁴. The Christian and European inhabitants of Faridpur and

Serajganj were thrown into a great panic and they appealed to the Government to send European guards for the protection of their persons and property²⁵. In a petition of all the Christian inhabitants of Moleykonda in which it was stated that Gureeb Husain Choudhury, a wealthy Zamindar of the district and a relative of Dudhu Miyan intended to fight with the government and had been manufacturing guns in his house. Though the petition mentioned above contained exaggerated accounts of the intended revolt by the Ferazees. Nevertheless, these petitions exposed the threat that the British government had to face from these quarters. Actually, the Ferazees became a source of great anxiety to the government²⁶.

Barishal was also not free from such influence. It appears from *The Dacca News* ‘the district Barishal has many thousand Ferazees who would think it a meritorious deed to cut the throat of a Christian dog’. *The Dacca News* also was of opinion that this trend was very much active even in Sylhet “a quiver of exultation running through the intelligent portion of the community..... Which might bring about an outburst of Muslim Fanaticism²⁷”. The Ferazees of Faridpur through their religious doctrines mobilized the regimented force of Assam and Kamrup. In order to suppress their rising the British East India Company had to install a European force.

In the case of Dacca we find a larger scale participation of the Ferazees. The Judicial Proceedings of West Bengal State Archives clearly point that these Ferazees were not at all the sepoys, that they maintained their identity as a separate class. Muin-ud-din Khan has accepted these views and he on the basis of the primary source of the Bangladesh National Archives, Dacca, has come to the conclusion that out of 119 sepoys of 73rd Native Infantry 14 were Muslims. But the Muslims’ participation cannot be ignored if anyone comes across the Diary of Lt. Brenand , the principal of Dacca college²⁸. In Dacca, in fact the rumors played a major factor what it actually happened in the periphery. George Dodd²⁹, Charles Rathbone Low³⁰ and Narahari Kaviraj accepted this view. Keramat Ali had been able to mobilize the Muslim community of Dacca, Jessore, Rajshahi, and Patna who also had an anti-colonial mentality and launched their campaign against the British Raj.

In this context we should mention the role of Dudu Miyan. He had indeed a chequered career. For more than a quarter of a century he remained the most controversial figure in Eastern Bengal. He was very much admired by his followers and equally disliked by his enemies. In the eyes of the zamindars and indigo-planters he was nothing but an unscrupulous self-seeker who feed upon the religious fanaticism of his followers. To his followers he was a great leader, teacher and guide. His name was a household word throughout the districts of Faridpur, Pabna, Bakargang, Dacca and Noakhali. Dudu Miyan was considered by the District Magistrate of Faridpur as unprincipled villain and his conduct has always been that of extreme fanaticism and regardless of all principle and humanity. He was considered as a villain by the British in the sense that according to the British viewpoint it was he who by looting the treasure of the Zamindars and plundering the commoners he increased his wealth and property. This ambivalence and contradiction was found in the character of Dudu Miyan³¹.

In spite of the retaliatory measures taken by the British Government Dudu Miyan appeared as formidable leader of the Ferazees. Thus the British Govt decided to arrest Dudu Miyan and to keep him in prison till the mutiny was suppressed. He was even sentenced to rigorous punishment for 14 years. The British apprehension and anxiety was clearly reflected in the opinion of the District Magistrate of Jessore. As Walter Scott Seton Kar has rightly observed, “Dudu Miyan had been an object of suspicion to the police authorities. The Ferazees hold some very questionable and wild doctrines about the non-payment of rent to infidel Zamindars. Some of them had been imprisoned for outrages on Hindu functionaries of a very violent character. This sect had correspondents among the Wahabees. The Ferazees were mainly looked as a fanatical sect of new and violent political opinion.”³²

The Wahabis emerged as a sect of indomitable people in the first half of the 19th century who carried war against the British power to liberate the country. The centers of their activity were Bihar and Lower Province of Bengal. The Wahabi Sardars made regular collections from a number of villages for the purpose of “waging war against the

English”³³. The collectors were mostly from the lower orders of Bengal. Several of these Sardars were arrested and confined under the provisions of Regulation III of 1818. Though the Wahabees did not openly participate in the revolt of 1857 but with their compact organization, secret cells in the Indian Army Units and their contacts in various princely states such as Tonk, Hyderabad etc had provided a solid organizational base that was copied and utilized directly by some of the non-Wahabee leaders of the movement of 1857-59.³⁴

Keramat Ali, one of the prominent Wahabee leaders who was a native of Jaunpur. He had traveled different parts of Eastern Bengal, Bihar and preached the Wahabi doctrines. He was considered as a fellow of weaver caste³⁵. He mobilized another formidable leader Rajab Ali who was the ringleader for inspiring the disgruntled Muslim community. Keramat Ali had been able to mobilize the Muslim community of Dacca, Jessore, Rajshahi, Faridpur, Bakharganj and Patna who also had an anti-colonial mentality and launched their campaign against the British Raj. In this context we should mention that on account of some difference in formula and approach Keramat Ali and his followers were heckled and attacked by Dudhu Miyan’s followers³⁶. The movement of Keramat Ali soon attracted Peer Ali of Patna who was the chief agent of Lucknow group and the hero of the 3rd July rising working in collaboration with Mehdi Ali, the Daroga of Cotegast in Patna city. Peer Ali had been able to keep contact with other leaders namely Luft Ali Khan, Ahmadullah and his father Maulavi Ellahi Bux. Peer Ali also invited Farhat Husain, the younger brother of Enayat Ali and the local leaders of the Wahabi at Patna to join the contemplated rising³⁷. The Government of East India Company described Peer Ali Khan as a “Chief Conspirator”. According to the statement of Ilahi Buksh, son of Sufadar Ali of Barh thana on 1st July on 1857 to the Magistrate of Patna, “there are arms and men collected at the house of Pir Ali Khan, a bookseller in Thannah Khajehkallan”³⁸. The Shea community of that district joined with the slogan “La-illaha-illaha”. The Magistrate of Patna did not hesitate to say that “they are Wahabi flags..... and expressed it as a Wahabi Movement.”³⁹ William Tayler, the Divisional Commissioner of Patna described the condition of Patna towards the middle of June 1857, “Although I have believed that in carrying out the great anti-Christian League....all sects would be willing

to merge their own sectarian differences for the time and to make common cause against the *Nasranees* (Christians) there were yet two special quarters from which danger might be looked for at Patna, firstly the partisans and adherents of Lucknow great party.....secondly, from the numerous and fanatical sect of Wahabees. In addition to this a great danger was expected from the excitement which might break out among the general mass of people if an outbreak occurred⁴⁰. In this context Ahmadullah, Muhammad Husain and Wuzul Haq were arrested by the government to protect the Company's law and order of the city. William Tayler thought that this act withheld the Wahabees from joining in the movement of 1857. In order to justify the detention of the Wahabees, Tayler advanced the argument that it was his action which forced Elahi Bux, father of of Ahmadullah, to lodge information with the local Magistrate about the impending rising of Peer Ali. We should also mention the role of Karam Ali and Ali Hossain. Karam Ali was of opinion, 'We should not disagree with any caste, not even with Hindoos ...and get our work done, and in disagreeing there will arise groundless disputes. For any part I am no terms with the Wahabees⁴¹,

The revolt of 1857 was such an event, which had various aspects and outlook that it is very difficult to come to a decisive conclusion particularly in identifying its character even today. But it widely spread in all over India and there is no doubt that the Wahabees and Ferazees had played a prominent role in the Great Revolt of 1857. Though in the very beginning the Wahabees and Ferazees played the role of reformer but gradually involved in the anti –imperialist movement.

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