

THE SEPOY MUTINY AND THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY OF BENGAL

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In its failure, the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58, proved a devastating holocaust, which raged in full fury throughout Northern India with its epi-centre at Delhi, Lucknow and Patna. It constantly threatened to engulf the whole of Bengal at any moment, yet like an encircling whirl-wind it descended, if at all, only in patches and scraps from time to time on few out-lying towns of the then province of Bengal. In the present Bangladesh, only the towns of Dacca and Chittagong were temporarily affected, which we may consider briefly here.

In 1857, two Companies of the 73rd Native Infantry Regiment were stationed at Dacca and two other Companies of the same Regiment were stationed at Jalpaiguri. Rahman Ali Taish narrates that on the 12th of June 1857, a rumour spread that the sepoys of Jalpaiguri have mutinied and having come down to Dacca they were joined by those Sepoys who were stationed at Lalbag. This rumour struck the European residents with terror and as they hurried to the Bungalow of the District Magistrate from all directions, the people also became panicky. But at the end this rumour came out to be false. Again on the 15th July one English officer brought the news from Calcutta that the Sepoys of Chittagong had risen and were proceeding towards Dacca, which also created panic, but latter on it also turned out to be false. As a result an uneasy calm prevailed among the people whereas the Europeans and Native Christians organized volunteer corps and remained vigilant. The rising of the Sepoy at Assam on the 14th September, 1857 again raised a general panic at Dacca, especially as the British troops proceeded thither from Calcutta through Dacca. But soon the Raja of Manipur was apprehended and taken prisoner on the 2nd October, and the situation gradually calmed down.

Similar fright and panic had also taken hold of Chittagong. This town was garrisoned by the remnants of the 34th Regiment which had mutinied at Barrackpur and was disbanded. The Chittagong Sepoys, however, remained loyal till they were exasperated by the suspicion and harassment meted out of them by their English officers. They rose all on a sudden on the 21st November, 1857, plundered the treasury, and the news spread that they were marching towards Dacca. In order to prevent any possibilities of combination of the Dacca Sepoys with the mutineers, which might spell disaster, the English officers decided to disarm the Native Guards at the Dacca court, and the Sepoys at Lalbag, in the morning of the 22nd November. The Guards at the court were taken by surprise who laid down their arms without resistance. But as the British Sailors and European volunteers approached Lalbag, at about 5 a.m., they found the Sepoys drawn out and prepared to give a resistance. After

a series of fierce fightings, the Sepoys were driven out, who ran pell-mell to all directions.

In his *Maymarsingher Itihas*, Kedarnath Majumdar says that the great panic which had overtaken the city of Dacca in the month of November, 1857, had also seriously affected the town of Mymensingh. Most of the inhabitants of the Mymensingh town were Hindus, who were afraid that the mutinous Sepoys of Dacca might come down there and plunder them. The rumour that the Sepoys had killed all the Europeans at Dacca and were about to reach Mymensingh was floated about in the air for sometimes and the people became so panicky that at the slightest rumour about the approach of the Sepoys they would leave the town and run away to the villages. Many had put their money in iron safes under the ground. A number of English schools were set up there and whenever the students heard any noise or tumult, they would get alarmed and run away from the school. According to one report, there was a teacher who went to repeat the phrase, "I say" meaninglessly, every now and then. One day while passing by the class, he saw another teacher whose name was Pramananda and he called out, "I say, Pramananda Babu". This threw the students into a panic who began to run away from the school crying "aisey" "aisey" meaning: "they have come, they have come." At last, the Sepoy really came down to the district of Mymensingh, but they passed on by the north-western road through the Bazar of Sambhuganj leaving the towns of Mymensingh and Jamalpur aside.

The Mutineers in Chittagong wrought serious distributions by breaking the prison, releasing convicts and plundering the government treasury. They, however, escaped through the jungle of Tippera into Sylhet and Cachar Districts of Assam, where they were annihilated by the loyal Sylhet Light Infantry and wild beasts. In Rajshahi division, there was a constant sense of apprehension, first on account of the suspected native troops at Jalpaiguri (the cavalry portion of which eventually mutinied), and afterwards because of the threatened approach of the mutinies from Dacca. Turning to the other side of Bengal, Sir Tudor Burne reports that Calcutta received some contagion of rebelliousness soon after the outbreak of mutiny in Delhi. In the evening of the 17th May, 1857, the 47th Native Infantry was found insinuating the Sepoys of 2nd and 70th Regiments to make a nightly attack on the Port William. The latter, however, turned down the proposal and informed the British authorities about this subversive move. Thereupon precautionary steps were taken and the disaffected Sepoys were disarmed.

In the division of Nadiya, Berhampur was rescued from threatened danger, first by the rapid dispatch of European troops by land and by steamer, and secondly, by the prompt measure for disarming the native Garrison. A uneasy feeling meanwhile extended itself through Krishna Nagar, Jessore, and the whole division. "In the Burdawan division, the Pachet Zamindar was said to have been in a state of semi-rebellion." It is true that a number of mutinous incidents had taken place in Bengal even before the actual commencement of the Great Mutiny. On the 26th February, 1857, the Sepoys at Berhampur refused to receive the 'percussion caps' of Enfield Rifle. On the 29th March, 1857, Sepoy Mangul Pande openly mutinied at Barrackpur. These incidents proved to be precursors of the Great Mutiny. But the sepoy involved in these incidents were not Bengalees, but recruit from Upper India; and consequently, their repercussions were felt more in U.P. and Delhi than in Bengal. On the 24th April, 1857, the Sepoys of Meerut refused to receive the new cartridges and on the 10th May,

1857, they rose in a body and marched to Delhi, which marked the beginning of the Great Sepoy Mutiny.

While in his official history, Sir Owen Tudor Burne stated that during the period of Mutiny, Bengalees as a whole remained tranquil, C.F. Baskland pointed out that, although no civil outbreak occurred anywhere in Bengal, the province passed the entire period of the revolt under mounting tension. In *Banglar Jagaran*, Qazi Abdul Wadud writes that the Sepoy Mutiny has been named the 'First War of Independence' by the Marhatta leader Vinayak Savarkar. There are many people who share this opinion with him. "However, in Bengal, or, at least, in Calcutta, the life-centre of Bengal, ... no impact of Sepoy Mutiny was felt." To illustrate the attitude of the contemporary Bengalee Hindus, he cites the observations of Harish Chandra Mukherjee, editor of the *Hindu Patriot*, to the effect that the Sepoy Mutiny was "merely a performance of the superstitious sepoys, having no connection whatsoever with the peasantry of the country, who are respectful and devoted to the English government, and their loyalty has remained unshaken." Man of such high calibre as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Devendra Nath Tagore, "whose patriotism and independent-mindedness are unquestionable, did not show any curiosity about the Mutiny." In his conclusion, he observed that the Sepoy Mutiny, on that occasion "did not touch the educated Bangalee nor did it touch the uneducated Bangalee Hindus. However, the fact that, it has shaken, to some extent, the Bangalee Muslims would become apparent from a subsequent chapter. But the Indigo rebellion of 1838-1860, had shaken all sections of Bengalis with considerable strength.

Indeed, many people do think that among the Muslims of Bengal, where existed considerable good will for the freedom fighters, such an apprehension, in the minds of the English administrators, may have been at the back of *Fara'izi* leader Dudu Miyan's arrest and detention from 1857 to 1860, since he had openly boasted before the English Magistrate that he could bring 50,000 men to the field at a moment's notice. Had there been any civil outbreak anywhere, many Bengali Muslims might have readily joined with the insurrectionists, and compared to the fightings in the plains of Mulka and Sittana, it would have been a much better easier matter. Yet, for reasons, (which call for a thorough investigation) the Bengali Muslims as well as the Hindus looked upon the Sepoy as different from them. At Chittagong, the people remained apathetic to the Mutineers; at Mymensingh, the Hindus felt panicky at the approach of the Sepoys; and at Dacca, the relations between the local people and the Sepoys were far from friendly. For instance, in a letter addressed by Stephen to C. Jenkins, Magistrate of Dacca, Dated 16th March, 1857, it is stated that, the Detachment of the 73rd Regiment of Native Infantry which was stationed at Dacca (and which latter on rebelled) consisted mostly of Brahmans of Oudh and Rajputs, and out of a total number of 119, there were only 14 Muslims including 3 Pathans. In another letter from the Commandment of the same Regiment to the principal Sudder Amin, dated 7 March, 1857, it is stated that, there was a riot between the Police Burkandazes and the Sepoys of Lalbag (Dacca), in which, a few Sepoys and Burkandazes as well as a few villagers were wounded. "There was a strong rumour", it continues, "That the Sepoys would attack the villagers. The relations between these Hindustani Sepoys and the local people are anything but not cordial." (of Magisterial Records; Criminal, Letters Received Vol. 72 preserved at the Dacca Court Records Room, arranged serially data-wise; see also, Munshi Rahman Ali Tayish; *Towarikh-i-Dhaka*, Arrah, 1910, p. 130 ff.)

Secondly, at the time of the great Sepoy Mutiny, de facto British rule in Bengal had been a hundred years old. In fact, the Mutiny of 1857 was a centenary of the Battle of Plassey. By that time, the old Mughal nobility of Bengal was completely eliminated by the British rulers and the new upper and middle classes who came up, by dint of the British policy, to fill up the gap, such as, the Nawabs, Zamindars, Khan Bahadurs, Rai Bahadurs, Gomashtahs and the official staff; and the modernist elite belonging to both Muslim and Hindu communities, had, more or less, adjusted themselves to the new British order and were reaping benefit out of it. They stood up everywhere in Bengal firmly behind the British, and even cooperated with the new rulers in suppressing the mutineers. Thus, the Mughal Royal Family and the upper classes of Delhi and U.P. who had assumed the leadership of the Sepoy Mutiny found no effective channel to extend their influence to the masses of Bengal.

Thirdly, on the religious inspirational side, many Muslim religious preachers and Fakeers of Bengal had propagated the idea of Jihad against the foreign rulers, and in various parts of the province, it had provoked great commotion, which, however, did not get any political outlet for the lack of requisite leadership. The *Farai'zi* mass leader, Dudu Miyan, who could provide a link between the leadership of the revolt and the masses of East Bengal was promptly arrested and lodged under the safe custody at the Alipore Jail.

Fourthly, as we have analysed in an article entitled 'Economic Condition of the Muslims of Bengal under East India Company'¹, the new politico-economic forces unleashed by the British rulers had offered security and unprecedented scope for amassing wealth to a microscope minority of natives and reduced the multitude to sub-human level of subsistence. The overthrow of the Mughal gentry and impoverishment and helplessness of the masses, led to the gradual break-down of the old 'organic' society, on the ruins of which there grew up, subsequent to the Sepoy Mutiny, the new 'dispersed' or individualistic society after the model of the West. At the close of the Company's rule in 1857, the disruption of the 'organic' society of the Muslims of Bengal, had been so great and disastrous that, it pushed the Muslim masses into the abyss of superstition, ignorance and a beastly inertia. Hence, cut off from the traditional source of leadership and direction, and left to themselves, the general run of the people of Bengal, proved utterly of incapable of contemplating the soul-moving ideas of 'freedom' and 'liberty' and the remained unconcerned spectators of one of the greatest events of history of the time.

This is, however, not to suggest that, the Bengalis had become tired of rebellion against the foreign rulers; soon after the Battle of Plassey, they rallied under the banners of Nawab Mir Qasim in C.E. 1764, and unsuccessfully tried to drive away the English usurpers. Thereafter, they continued to push up the Fakeer Rebellion under the leadership of Majnu Shah Fakeer and Bhavani Pathak (from C.E. 1831 to 1857). Even at the time of Sepoy Mutiny, while one section of the Bengalee Muslims were taking prominent parts in the anti-British operations in the North West Frontier, others started a Hindu-Muslim combined struggle at home against the oppressions of the European Indigo planters – a non-violent mass rally, resulting eventually in the so-called Nil Viroha or Indigo Rebellion of 1854-1860.

To say the least, the Indigo Rebellion exerted a deep impression on the life, society and literature of Bengal and heralded the famous Krishak Andolan or the Peasant Movement, which carried the fire of its slogan: “land to the tiller” – even to the post-Pakistan era, by abolishing the Zamindari system East Bengal in 1952.

Thus, the Revolt of 1857, found by the people of Bengal deeply engaged in a long-drawn fierce struggle against the indigo planters, which they fought tenaciously and won by compelling the British government to abolish the forced cultivation of indigo in 1860. The practical non-involvement of the Bengalis in the Sepoy Mutiny saved their skin from the immediate and terrible reprisals of the Englishmen that befell the lot of the people of Hindustan. Yet, for the Muslims it was not proof enough, of their loyalty to the foreign rulers, nor could they escape, on that account, from the renewed anti-Muslim campaign of suspicion, hatred and discrimination launched by the English officers that enveloped almost in no time, the Indo-Muslim community as a whole. Moreover, the revolt of 1857, proved an epoch-making event which affected the life and thought of the Bengali Muslims as deeply as those of the other parts of the Indian sub-continent.

Among other things, we may recount in this connection that the failure of the great revolt dealt a final blow to the idea of the Mughal Empire and, according to an eminent historian it also put a seal on the decline of the Indo-Muslim community in all walks of life. The Muslims themselves came to realize that a new empire was established by a foreign race. Hence they began to shun the warring mentality against the British and looked askance towards Western civilization brought by the new rulers for deliverance from the predicament. The most memorable result of the great revolt was however transfer of power from the irresponsible hands of the East India Company to the British crown, which brought the Indian affairs under the vigilant eye as well as under direct control, of the British Parliament. This permitted a healthy constitutional development of Indian politics within certain prescribed limits. As the retributory attitude of Englishmen drove the Muslims into a grave crisis, so also the scope for constitutional development threw a challenge to their genius and potentialities. Out of the hope and despair, generated by this ‘crisis-challenge-complex’ was born the erstwhile Muslim modernism, under the leadership of Nawab Abdul Latif (C.E. 1828-1893) and Syed Ameer Ali (C.E. 1849-1928) in U.P. and the Punjab, which sought to divert the attention of the Muslims from the abysmal anguish and remorse to a bright new horizon and to beat a new track for their progress on modern scientific lines.

To sum up the foregoing points, we may note, in the first place, that the British official accounts and the available records agree that although during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58, the then province of Bengal passed under mounting tension, for some reason or other, the Bengalis themselves remained more or less aloof from the revolt and no civil out-break occurred anywhere in Bengal. Secondly, the Sepoys stationed in Bengal appear to have been recruited from the Upper Provinces of India, and in their day-to-day life, remained strangers to the Bengalis. As a result, sufficiently close relations did not develop between the Bengali locals and non-Bengali Sepoys to make the Bengalis feel a stake in the Mutiny of the Sepoys.

Thirdly, one hundred years of the Company’s rule had disrupted the old organic society of Bengal and the impoverished and leaderless masses probably proved incapable of contemplating the soul-moving abstract ideas of ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’

to understand the real import of the Mutiny, on the one hand, and being cut off from the old Mughal nobility, probably did not get a fresh 'link up' with the Delhi and U.P. based leadership of the Mutiny, on the other. Lastly, having gone through the ordeal of the British colonial rule for one hundred years, the Bengalis had developed a different technique to counter the oppressions of the ruling class, and at the time of the out-break of the Mutiny, the Bengalis were already engaged in a long-drawn struggle against the Zamindars and European Indigo Planters, in which they were employing non-violent and constitutional tactics which did not fit in well with the armed of the Sepoys which characterised the Mutiny.

The Sepoy Mutiny was, however, an epoch-making event in the history of the Indian sub-continent, and hence, by their non-involvement in it, they were not left immune of its far-reaching consequences. Rather the Muslim community of Bengal, who had so far remained aloof from modernist trends, after the passing of Mutiny, began to take the educational modernism seriously, and Muslim boys started going to the modern school as their Hindu counterpart started doing so over half-a-century age.

References

1. Islamic Studies, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan, Vol. VI, No. 3, Sept. 1967, pp. 278-88.

This Article was obtained directly from the author.