

Book Review

Life of a Sepoy Mutiny Leader

By Muhammad Akhteruzzaman

Habilder Rajab Ali, by A. K. M. Mohiuddin, published by Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka, pp36, PB, 1986, Taka 12.

This book is a historical story written for young children. It is based on one of the freedom-fighters (according to others, rebels) who took up arms against the colonial British rulers during the Sepoy Mutiny and fought for Indian freedom.

The East India Company came to India for trade and commerce, and established its main base in Calcutta. Nawab Siraj al-Dawlah was the ruler of Bengal at that time. It was a time when the Muslim community in the subcontinent in general and Bengal in particular was in decline, while the Hindus worked closely with the Company officials for the downfall of the Nawab. Robert Clive of the Company noticed this situation and decided to use it to his advantage. He conspired with the anti-Nawab elements in order to overthrow the latter and take control of India's key economic interests and assets. With the help of his Hindu supporters and Mir Jafar, the treacherous Chief of Army of the Nawab, Robert Clive defeated the latter and established Company rule in that region. After winning a number of battles, the East India Company finally gained control of the entire subcontinent.

The Company officials knew that to rule India they needed to adopt a policy of "divide and rule". They favoured a section of the Hindus and put them in all administrative and privileged positions. At the same time, they removed Muslims from senior administrative roles. They

then took control of lands that belonged to the Muslim zamindars (landholders) and sold them off to the Hindu landholders and businessmen for minimal price, otherwise known as the Permanent Settlement. Overnight, the Muslim landholders became poor and destitute while the Hindu community of Bengal went onto consolidate their political, economic, social, religious and educational condition. As more and more restrictions were imposed on the Muslim community, they felt increasingly marginalised and disadvantaged in their own homeland until some Muslim scholars (ulama) and leaders felt they had to unite as a community if they were to survive the political, economic and cultural onslaught. They began to preach the message of resistance against all forms of oppression; thus the religious scholars imparted lessons on the virtues of struggle for justice and fairness in their seminaries (madrasahs), just as the political groups started training young people in the art of self-defence against aggressors of all shapes and forms. Soon a revivalist movement was born which inspired people from all over India. This resistance movement culminated in the Sepoy Mutiny that took place in 1857 in different parts of India.

At the time, Chittagong was the Headquarter of the 34th Regiment. Under the leadership of Habildar Rajab Ali the soldiers of the regiment revolted against their colonial masters. The Mutineers (or Revolutionaries) came out of the garrison and looted the arms from the garrison. They took control of the prison, releasing all the freedom-fighters who had been imprisoned there and set the Magazine House on fire. They took over the government treasury and looted all the money and valuables to be used in armed struggles against their colonial rulers.

The Mutineers then left Chittagong and moved towards Tippera. They hoped that the King of Tippera would help them in their struggle. They had a long arduous journey through the Indian jungles and finally arrived at Tippera. On the way, a large number of the Mutineers died in battles or due to illness. Upon arrival in Tippera, they discovered that the King was in fact an ally of the colonial rulers. In the ensuing battle between the Mutineers and the King's soldiers, many Mutineers died on the battlefield although a handful managed to reach Sylhet and the Cachar Districts of Assam.

According to his biographers, Habildar Rajab Ali was eventually captured. He was tried in a hurriedly constituted Chittagong Military Court and was subsequently hanged at the Parade Ground. The Sepoy Mutiny in general and the actions of Habildar Rajab Ali and his colleagues in particular provided a powerful account of the role of Muslims in colonial

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Bengal. Although written for children, this book is a useful and interesting but largely neglected account of the life and works of Habildar Rajab Ali who inspired generations of people of Bengal to strive for their freedom and self-determination.

However, for a more detailed and critical assessment of the Sepoy Mutiny and its consequences, I would refer the readers to Professor Dr Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan's research monograph titled *The Great Revolt of 1857 in India and the Muslims of Bengal*, published by Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1983.

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