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Role of Muslims in India's Freedom Struggle

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Abstract

Indian Freedom is written in Muslim blood, since their participation in freedom struggle was much more, in proportion to their small percentage of the population." There are 95300 names of freedom fighters written on India Gate Delhi, out of these 61945 are Muslims which means 65% freedom fighters are Muslims. Muslims were allowed to build mosques, intermarry with Indian women, and very soon an Indian-Arabian community came into being. Early in the 9th century, Muslim missionaries gained a notable convert in the person of the King of Malabar. To break the myth of every person who believes Muslims have given no contribution to India's history, we have tried to come up with a list of 11 Muslim fighters who fought for India's Independence and are still present somewhere in India's history. "The Musalmans of India are, and have been for many years, a source of chronic danger to the British Power in India. The generations brought up over this narrative believe that either the Indian Muslims were pro-British or aloof from the freedom struggle. In this age of social media, we find people questioning the patriotism of the Indian Muslims based on this false understanding of the freedom struggle. In fact, almost 30% of the total martyrs mentioned in 'Dictionary of Martyrs of India's Freedom Struggle (1857-1947)' launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019 are Muslims. The unity of Hindus and Muslims in 1857 threatened the British like never before. They resorted to a policy of divide and rule after that. Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad, Fazl-e-Haq of Khairbad, Imdadullah Muhajir Makki of Muzaffarnagar and Azimullah Khan, an associate of Nana Saheb, were propagating the idea of taking up the arms against the colonial rulers among the sepoys and common man for years before the revolt. In Tamil Nadu, Abdul Rahim organized the workers during the 1930s against the oppressive colonial rule. V. M Abdullah, Sharif Brothers, and Abdul Sattar were other prominent Muslim leaders in South India who led nationalist movements and braved torture and imprisonments. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan led Pathans posed a non-violent challenge to the British. In 1930, the British fired upon a crowd protesting against the arrest of Ghaffar Khan at Qissa Khwani Bazar, Peshawar. Hundreds of Pathans laid their lives for the service of the motherland.

Keywords: freedom struggle, muslims contribution,unity of hindus and muslims, great sacrifice.

Introduction

The famous writer, Mr. Kushwant Singh, once wrote: "Indian Freedom is written in Muslim blood, since their participation in freedom struggle was much more, in proportion to their small percentage of the population." There are 95300 names of freedom fighters written on India Gate Delhi, out of these 61945 are Muslims which means 65% freedom fighters are Muslims. Muslim leaders who contributed in India's freedom struggle include, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Muhammad Ali, Maulana Shuakat Ali, Allama Iqbal, Muhammad Barkathulla, Bi Amma (mother of Ali brothers), Badarudeen Tyabji, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Dr. M.A. Ansari, Dr. Siafudeen Kichlu, Dr. Basheer Ahmad, Syed Ameer Ali, Dr. Syed Muhammad, Hasrat Mohani, Nawab Abdul Latheef, Altaf Hussain Hali, Syed Ahmad Sirhindi, Syed Ahmad Barielly, Maulana Shibli Numani, Munshi Karamat Ali, Munshi Zakaullah (Delhi) were very few names in the history

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of freedom movement. But, there are many Muslim leaders who were forgotten by our writers.

The contributions of Muslims to India

Muslims were allowed to build mosques, intermarry with Indian women, and very soon an Indian-Arabian community came into being. Early in the 9th century, Muslim missionaries gained a notable convert in the person of the King of Malabar. To break the myth of every person who believes Muslims have given no contribution to India's history, we have tried to come up with a list of 11 Muslim fighters who fought for India's Independence and are still present somewhere in India's history.

In such a scenario, it was one braveheart who dared to rebel against the British – Mangal Pandey, the man who is often referred to as the first freedom fighter of India. Islam brought to India a conception of human equality, pride in one's religion, a legal system which was in many ways an advance on the codes of the time Hindu rulers were influenced to work as the upholders of Hindu religion. The largest Muslim population in a country is in Indonesia, a country home to 12.7% of the world's Muslims, followed by Pakistan (11.1%), India (10.9%) and Bangladesh (9.2%). About 20% of Muslims live in the Arab world. Rani Lakshmibai, Mangal Pandey, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Nana Sahib and Tatya Tope were some of the active leaders and freedom fighters who fought in the revolt. Mangal Pandey is considered as the hero in the modern India because he had played a pivotal role in beginning the revolt against the British.

Accepted Islam first in India

Numerous Indians living in the coastal areas of Kerala accepted the principles of the new religion and converted to Islam. The Brahmin King Cheraman Perumal was the first Indian to convert to Islam based on a historical event. The event was that a group of Prophet Muhammad's Sahaba visited Kodungallur. After the capture of Lahore and the end of the Ghaznavids, the Ghurid Empire ruled by Muhammad of Ghor and Ghiyath al-Din Muhammad laid the foundation of Muslim rule in India. In 1206, Bakhtiyar Khalji led the Muslim conquest of Bengal, marking the easternmost expansion of Islam at the time.In the Hadith collections, the prophet is reported to have said: "There are two groups of my Ummah whom Allah will free from the Fire: The group that invades India, and the group that will be with Isa ibn Maryam". "The Messenger of Allah promised that we would invade India.

Glorious Role of Muslims in freedom struggle

“The Musalmans of India are, and have been for many years, a source of chronic danger to the British Power in India.” W W Hunter, an English official posted in India, in his famous book ‘The Indian Musalmans’, published in 1871.India gained independence in 1947. The new nation produced its scholars, who wrote a ‘nationalist’ history of the Indian freedom struggle. But, for the reasons known only to these scholars their accounts majorly excluded Muslims. For seven decades, we are reading a history of the Indian Freedom Struggle that has overlooked the contribution of Muslims. The generations brought up over this narrative believe that either the Indian Muslims were pro-British or aloof from the freedom struggle. In this age of social media, we find people questioning the patriotism of the Indian Muslims based on this false understanding of the freedom struggle. In fact, almost 30% of the total martyrs mentioned in ‘Dictionary of Martyrs of India’s Freedom Struggle (1857-1947)’ launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019 are Muslims. We must take note that the dictionary does not account for the martyrs before 1857 who were in large numbers as well. Such falsehoods propagated in the name of history should be challenged. The British imperialism in India was resisted by the Indians right from its outset and the Muslims were

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the flag bearers of this resistance. The British took over Bengal administratively and economically after defeating the royal armies at the Battle of Plessey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar (1764). With their win over the Nawab of Bengal, the British started exploiting the people of Bengal. Their ruthless loot resulted in a famine in 1770 that caused the deaths of one-third of the population of Bengal.

No wonder the first popular national resistance to colonial rule arose in Bengal. A united front of Hindu Sanyasis and Muslim Fakirs rose up in arms against the British. The man who led this fight was Majnu Shah, a Muslim Sufi from Kanpur (Uttar Pradesh). Majnu was a devotee of Shah Madar of Kanpur and took up the cause of poor peasants on the instructions of another Sufi saint, Hamiduddin. Almost 2,000 Fakirs and Sanyasis, under his command, looted the treasures of the British and British-backed landlords and distributed the money and food among the poor.

From 1763 till his death in 1786, Majnu was the most dangerous threat to the British Empire in India. Fakir and Sanyasi forces killed several officers and soldiers of the British in guerrilla wars. After his death, Musa Shah took up the leadership of the movement. Hindu Sanyasi leaders, like Bhawani Pathak, were also there and fought alongside but the colonial records considered Majnu as the most threatening leader because under him Hindus and Muslims fought a united war. The ruthless British suppressed this movement a few years after Majnu's death. However, they failed to kill the spirit of nationalism.Within a few years of the end of the Fakir and Sanyasi resistance, the British faced another challenge in the form of three distinct movements led by Syed Ahmad Barelvi, Haji Shariatullah and Titu Mir respectively.

The Uttar Pradesh born Syed Ahmad gained a lot of following during his tour of Bihar, Bengal and Maharashtra. His followers took up arms against the British and its allies in the areas adjacent to Afghanistan. The British painted the movement as a work of religious fanaticism while in reality, Syed Ahmad had tried to ally with Marathas. After he died in 1831, Enayat Ali and Wilayat Ali, both from Patna, took up the leadership of the movement. They led the wars in the frontier region saw hundreds of British soldiers perish. In Bengal, Haji Shariatullah and his son Dudu Miyan took up arms against the tyranny of landlords. They led peasants' revolt against the indigo planters and other British agents. The movement they led is known as the Faraizi movement. Titu Mir also led a movement of poor masses against the British backed landlords. He set up his army and a popular administration. In 1831, Titu was killed during a battle with the British. They also arrested hundreds of his supporters and also his deputy Ghulam Masum, and hanged them.

Meanwhile, the Movement started by Syed Ahmad posed a grave threat to the British rule in India. Enayat Ali, Wilayat Ali, Karamat Ali, Zainuddin, Farhat Husain and others led an armed struggle against the British. As soon as the news of the revolt of 1857 reached Patna, all prominent leaders were arrested. Pir Ali somehow managed to launch a revolt. Though he was not part of the larger movement, the British believed he had their supporter. Pir Ali, Waris Ali and other Muslim revolutionaries were executed in Bihar in 1857. The role of Muslims in 1857 is no secret. The unity of Hindus and Muslims in 1857 threatened the British like never before. They resorted to a policy of divide and rule after that. Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad, Fazl-e-Haq of Khairbad, Imdadullah Muhajir Makki of Muzaffarnagar and Azimullah Khan, an associate of Nana Saheb, were propagating the idea of taking up the arms against the colonial rulers among the sepoys and common man for years before the revolt.

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In Meerut, 85 sepoys revolted against their British masters on 10 May 1857. Half of them were Muslims. Sheikh Peer Ali, Ameer Qudrat Ali, Sheikh Hasan ud-Deen and Sheikh Noor Muhammad were the leaders of the revolt. The group was soon joined by the civilians as they marched to Delhi and proclaimed Bahadur Shah Zafar as the emperor of India. Delhi was liberated. In Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal took up the arms against the British and led one of the longest resistance movements. Maulvi Ahmadullah was also fighting the British with his armed followers and attained martyrdom during a battle. In his book on the revolt, Veer Savarkar dedicated several pages to the valour and martyrdom of Ahmadullah.

In Muzaffarnagar, Imdadullah led a popular revolt with the help of Qasim Nanautvi, Rashid Gangohi and others liberated Shamli and Thana Bhawan. A national government was set up. These revolutionaries were later defeated as the British recaptured the region. Nawab of Jhajjar, Abdur Rehman, was also hanged by the British. The list is unending. The British records mention several Muslims who fought them in 1857. For example, an anonymous Burqa clad Muslim woman killed several English soldiers in Delhi before being arrested. The revolt did not succeed. Bahadur Shah was exiled to Burma, several were hanged and many more were transported for life to Andamans. But, the zeal for freedom did not die. In 1863, tribals in North-West Frontier Province stormed the British territories and entered into a war. The British, though registered a victory, had to face one of the stiffest military challenges. They lost more than 1,000 soldiers. Intelligence reports pointed towards a financier in Ambala. The man was Jafar Thanesri. During the raid, police found several letters that established him as the principal financier of the war in NWFP. He channelled money, men and arms from different parts of the country to the war front. Yahya Ali of Patna and nine others were also charged for waging the war against the Queen. What followed was a series of arrests and trials across India.

People were arrested in Ambala, Patna, Malda and Rajmahal. Ahmadullah, Yahya Ali, Jafar, Ibrahim Mandal, Rafique Mandal and others were arrested and transported to Andamans. Seeing the revolutionaries celebrate martyrdom the British decided not to hang them and consigned them to the circular jail of Andamans. In 1869, Amir Khan and Hashmat Khan were arrested in Kolkata. Norman, the Chief Justice, sentenced them to the Andamans. The sentence was avenged by Abdullah by assassinating Norman in 1871 and after a few months, Sher Ali killed the viceroy, Lord Mayo, in the Andamans. Bipin Chandra Pal, in his autobiography, credited these trials and killings as an important influence on his political career. Another famous revolutionary, Trailokya Chakravarty, noted, “the Muslim revolutionary brothers gave us practical lessons of unbending audacity and inflexible will and also advice to learn from their mistakes.”

In Maharashtra, Ibrahim Khan, a Rohilla leader, and Balwant Phadke launched a guerilla war against the British. They provided a tough resistance through the 1860s and 70s and threatened the British in south India. Meanwhile, in 1885, Indian National Congress (INC) was formed to voice the apprehensions of the emerging educated middle class. Badruddin Tayyabji and Rahmatullah Siani were two of the earliest members and presidents of Congress. Later on, M.A Ansari, Hakim Ajmal Khan, Hasrat Mohani, Abul Kalam Azad, and others remained associated with the largest political outfit of India. In 1907, peasants in Punjab started agitation against the canal colonies. Along with Lala Lajpat Rai and Sardar Ajit Singh, Syed Hyder Raza was one of its prominent leaders. The movement is seen as a precursor to the Gadar movement.

During the First World War (1914 - 18), the British intercepted three letters written on silk cloth. The letters were written by Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi to Maulana Mahmood

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Hasan and pointed towards a global plan to overthrow the British rule in India. Ubaidullah was named as one of the most dangerous Indians for the British in the Rowlatt Committee Report. He formed armed groups, preached anti-British ideas and formed a provisional government in Kabul. The Prime Minister of the government was Maulana Barkatullah. The government had to have an army as well, which would attack India to free it. But, the plan failed because of the leaked silk letters and the end of the World War. The plan was called Silk Letter Movement and 59 freedom fighters, mostly Muslims, were charged for waging the war against the Empire. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Abdul Bari Firangi Mahli, Ubaidullah Sindhi, Maulana Mahmood, Husain Ahmad Madni and M.A Ansari were few of them. Maulana Mahmood and Madni were arrested in Makkah and imprisoned in Malta. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who is often seen as a token Muslim in a largely Hindu dominated Congress, was a freedom fighter whom the British feared. His name occurred in different CID reports for planning armed revolutions. At least 1700 freedom fighters took an oath to die for the cause of freedom. They were members of Hizbullah, a revolutionary organization formed by Azad. His newspaper Al-Hilal was banned for propagating revolutionary nationalist ideas. Azad established Darul Irshad, a madrasa, to popularize anti-colonial ideas. For his organization, Hizbullah, Jalaluddin and Abdur Razzak were prominent recruiters, who also united Hindu and Muslim revolutionaries of Bengal. No wonder, Azad was jailed many times and was the President of INC when the Quit India Resolution of 1942 was passed.

The Silk Letter Movement was not the only resistance movement during World War. Ghadar Movement was another movement in which several Muslims took part and attained martyrdom. Rehmat Ali was hanged in Lahore for trying to instigate mutiny among soldiers. The efforts bore fruit in Singapore, when, in February 1915, the 5th Light Infantry consisting mostly of Muslims from Punjab revolted. The soldiers captured Singapore for a few days. The revolutionaries were later defeated, captured and shot dead.

Another misconception prevalent among Indians is that the Bengali revolutionaries were Hindus. Interestingly, the revolutionary organizations with Hindu religious overtones, like Jugantar and Anushilan had many active Muslim members. Sirajul Haq, Hamidul Haq, Abdul Momin, Maksuddin Ahmad, Maulvi Ghayasuddin, Nasiruddin, Razia Khatun, Abdul Kader, Wali Nawaz, Ismail, Zahiruddin, Chand Miyan, Altaf Ali, Alimuddin, and Fazlul Kader Chowdhury were few of the Bengali Muslim revolutionaries who took up arms along with Hindus. Many of them were sent to Andamans or killed.

After World War, the British introduced a draconian Rowlatt Act. The Indians protested against the act and many leaders were arrested. At Jallianwala Bagh people were massacred when they were protesting against the arrest of Saifuddin Kitchlew. The proportion of Muslims killed at Jallianwala was quite high. Around this time, 1919 onwards, Abdul Bari Firangimahli, Mazharul Haque, Zakir Husain, Mohammad Ali, and Shaukat Ali emerged as the mass leaders. Women like Bi Amma, Amjadi Begum, and Nishat al-Nisa also jumped into the freedom struggle.

Muslim Leaders in Tamil Nadu

In Tamil Nadu, Abdul Rahim organized the workers during the 1930s against the oppressive colonial rule. V. M Abdullah, Sharif Brothers, and Abdul Sattar were other prominent Muslim leaders in South India who led nationalist movements and braved torture and imprisonments. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan led Pathans posed a non-violent challenge to the British. In 1930, the British fired upon a crowd protesting against the arrest of Ghaffar Khan at Qissa Khwani Bazar, Peshawar. Hundreds of Pathans laid their lives for the service of the motherland. In 1941, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose escaped from house arrest. The man

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who played an important role in the escape was Mian Akbar Shah. Netaji reached Berlin and formed a Free India Legion. Abid Hasan became his confidant here and served as secretary. Abid was his only associate who accompanied him on a famous submarine journey from Germany to Japan. In 1943, Netaji formed Azad Hind Sarkar and Azad Hind Fauj. Here several Muslims like Lt. Col. Aziz Ahmad, Lt. Col. M.K Kiani, Lt. Col. Ehsan Qadir, Lt. Col. Shah Nawaz, Karim Ghani, and D.M Khan became ministers with important portfolios. Azad Hind Fauj faced reverses in war and its soldiers were taken prisoners by the British. Rashid Ali's imprisonment became a symbol of Hindu Muslim unity when Hindus and Muslims across the political affiliations came out on Kolkata road demanding his, and other Azad Hind Fauj soldiers, release in 1946. The police fired upon the protesters killing dozens of Indians. Elsewhere, in Mumbai and Karachi, the Royal Navy revolted in support of Azad Hind Fauj. Anwar Husain was one of the prominent martyrs of this revolt as Colonel Khan led the soldiers in revolt at Mumbai port. India gained independence on 15 August 1947. It was a costly affair. The cost was the Indian lives. The lives we paid were neither Hindu nor Muslim. The lives belonged to the Indians. Those who laid their lives were Indians first, and Hindus or Muslims later. Tragically, more than seven decades later people have forgotten this important aspect of our freedom struggle and try to divide this great struggle along petty sectarian lines.

Conclusion

The history of the Indian national movement would be incomplete without mentioning the heartily services of Abadi Begum, Amjadi Begum, Amina Tyabji, Begum Sakina Luqmani, Nishat-un-Nisa, Saadat Bano Kitchlew, Zulekha Begum (wife of Maulana Azad), Mehr Taj (daughter of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan), Zubaida Begum Daoodi and many others. Santimoy Ray's "Freedom movement and Indian Muslims" , challenges the many prejudices that generate bias and hatred against the Indian Muslims, particularly their contentions role in Indian freedom movement. This shows the great sacrifices they made to oust the British rule in all the national uprisings from Sanyasi Movement to independence, finally led to the withdrawal of British from India in 1947. It is such a pity that their roles in the struggle for freedom has not been adequately presented in the Indian history. The comprehensive study about the role of Muslims struggle for Freedom is essential to help eradicating prejudices and many misconceptions against the Muslims grown in the absence of fair historiography. In Tamil Nadu, Ismael Shaheb and Maruda Nayagam fought against British for seven continuous years. They made British fear like hell. Tiruppur Kumaran participated in the Indian independence movement. With Kumaran seven other participants were arrested – all were Muslims: Abdul Latheef, Akbar Ali, Mohideen Khan, Abdul Rahim, Vavu Shaheb, Abdul Latheef and Sheikh Baba Shaheb. So Muslim contribution in India's freedom struggle is unforgettable.

End Notes

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