HINDUS AND MUSLIMS IN THE FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE OF 1857 & EMERGENCE OF TWO-NATION THEORY

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Hindus and Muslims of the Indian subcontinent constitute a joint nation, or happen to form two separate nationalities, as they follow two different religions. This debate has been an integral and fundamental part of our political discourse since the closing years of 19th century. This debate did raise some important and serious concerns with which we continue to grapple even today. It has been the period in which a notable section of the leadership of both the religions left no stone unturned in trying to prove that the followers of these two separate religions, naturally and historically constituted two separate nations. We discuss here how a united nation during 1857 War of Independence came to suffer by the juggernaut of practitioners of Two-nation theory.

Unfortunately, many of us are not familiar with the fact that it was Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894) who set in motion this unwarranted process. He, through his literary writings, played the most important role in reducing Indian nationalism to Hindu nationalism. It is for this contribution that he was described as the founder of 'neo-Hinduism.' In fact, Aurobindo, a saint and contemporary of Bankim, saw him as a seer who created a Hindu nation. In him, nationalism and Hinduism merged as one, and the slogan of Hindu India became the mantra (hymn) of high caste Hindu gentry.

Anandmath, a novel written by Bankim in Bengali, was the first important work outlining the concept of a Hindu Rashtra and continues to be the Bible for the believer in the concept of a Hindu nation even today. Before getting familiarized with the Anandmath, it will be appropriate to know few important facts about the novel and its author. This is the same novel in which Bankim presented the song Vande Mataram which equated nationalism to Mother India. Anandmath is basically the story of the Hindu Sanyasi (ascetics) Rebellion of the late 18th century in North Bengal against Muslim rule. These rebels called themselves Santans (children). This novel appeared in 1882–5, about 25 years after the defeat of the Indians in the Great War of Independence of 1857 when even the ceremonial authority of Muslim rulers was gone. The British rulers held mainly Muslims responsible for the 1857 Rebellion and consequently penalized them heavily.

Anandmath appeared when British sovereignty had been formally established over a large portion of India. Interestingly, Bankim, the author of Anandmath, was appointed directly to the post of Deputy Magistrate in the year 1858 by the British Lieutenant Governor of Bengal. He was the first Indian to be appointed to such a post immediately after1857. When Bankim retired as District Magistrate in the year 1891 he was conferred with the titles of Rai Bahadur and CIE (Companion of the Indian Empire) by the British Crown.

Bankim's Hindu Separatism had two integral elements, immense hatred for Muslims and tremendous love for the British rulers, which later became the hallmark of Hindutva brand of politics. A perusal of the few passages of Anandmath would make it abundantly clear how the persecution of Muslims was glorified during a period when the British rulers were indulging in worst kind of persecution of the Indians. Bankim while describing the activities of the Hindu Santans in the countryside wrote:

"They started sending up the spies to the village after village. After going to the villages and finding out the Hindus there, the spies asked them, 'brothers, would you worship the Lord Bishnu?' They gathered 20/25 persons by this means, they came down to the Muslim villages and torched their houses. The Muslims were worried for safety of their lives and the Santans robbed them of everything and distributed the booty amongst the new devotees of the Lord Bishnu. Obtaining share of the booty, the rural people were satisfied…The people found that Santanism paid instant dividends … They organized themselves in groups and went out to subdue the Muslims…They brought home money by way of looting wherever they found it. Wherever they got the Muslim villages, they reduced them to ashes by arson."[1]

The scene of a Santans' meetings is described thus:

"Someone shouted, 'kill, kill, kill Muslims, others shouted as victory, victory, victory to the Maharaj' … Some other said, 'brothers, when the Sunday would come up while I would build up a temple of Radhamadhab, demolishing down the mosque'."[2]

And it is how Anandmath describes the graphic details of the post-victory jubilation of the Hindu Army:

"The country was replete with the shouting of name of Hari in the night. The Santans wandered here and there in group-by-group…Great uproars prevailed in village after village, town after town within one night. Everybody said the Muslims have been defeated; the country belonged to the Hindus again. All of you tell once again in open loud voice, 'Hari, Hari'. The rural people ran out to kill the Muslims while coming across them. In the night, someones were organized in groups and going to the Muslim locality, they torched their houses and looted their everything. Many Muslims were killed, many of them shaved their beards, smeared their bodies with soil and started singing the name of Hari. When asked, they said, we were Hindus. The frightened Muslims rushed towards the town in group after group […] The Muslims said, Allah, Allah! Is the Koran Sareef [sic] [holy Koran] proved entirely wrong after so many days? We pray namaz for five times but couldn't finish the sandal-pasted Hindus. All the universe is false."[3]

As a pioneer of the cause of the Hindu Rashtra, Bankim was very clear in his liking for the British rulers. His comparison of the British rulers with Muslims in the novel is very meaningful. In Anandmath, a leader of the Hindu Army, Bhavanand, while explaining the difference between the British and Muslims to a 'new recruit' says:

"One Englishman does not flee away even at the risk of his life, the Muslim flees while sweating his body—he searches for the sherbat [sweetened drink]—supposing, the Englishmen have their tenacity—whatever they start, they accomplish it, while the Muslims have only foolhardiness…Then last word is courage…while finding one cannon-ball [falling] Muslims would flee away with their entire community—while coming across the barrage of cannon-balls, not a single Englishman would flee away."[4]

This novel is replete with such glorifications of the imperialist masters. The British rulers who had looted India, destroying the lives and properties of Indians, were depicted as brave and superior human souls. They were portrayed as great rulers and were welcomed as saviours of Hindus. This love for the British masters and exploiters is further crystallized in the last few lines of Anandmath. The Santan Rebellion caused not only the

overthrow of Muslim rule but also facilitated the taking over of the rule by the British masters. When some of the Santan cadres dissatisfied with the outcome demanded to fight against the British also, a mystic leader appears and tells them:

"There is no possibility of restoring the Sanatan virtue without the Englishman becoming King…The subjects [Hindus] would be happy in the English kingdom they would practice the virtue without any trouble. Therefore, oh prudent you refrain from waging the war with the Englishmen and follow me…Your mission has been successful–you have performed well-being of the Mother–the English reign has been established. You give up the war and enmity-mood. Let the people be engaged in cultivation–let the earth be full of corns, let the people be prosperous…There is no more enemy. The Englishman is our ally King. Moreover, none possesses such power who can win the war with the Englishmen ultimately."[5]

Thus the supreme leader of Hindu rebellion was finally able to convince the Santans about the historic utility of the British Raj for resurrection of the Hindu kingdom and many of them went to Himalayas renouncing this world. Anandmath, which heralded the Hindu nationalist movement, is full of such perceptions.

It is fairly well-known that Choudhary Rahmat Ali envisaged the idea of Pakistan in 1933[6] through a pamphlet Now or Never while studying in the Cambridge University. He developed his concept of a separate nation for Muslims on the argument that "Hindus and Muslims were two different nations with entirely irreconcilable worldviews, sense of history and destiny".[7] However, it is not known by many that Hindu leaders like Bhai Parmanand had been propounding theories of the same effect much earlier. Bhai Parmanand declared in the beginning of the twentieth century itself that followers of Hinduism and Islam in India were two different people because Muslims followed a religion which originated in the Arab lands. It was as early as 1908–9 that he called for the total exchange of Hindu and Muslim populations in two specific areas. According to his plan, elaborated in his autobiography,

"The territory beyond Sind should be united with Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province into a great Musalman kingdom. The Hindus of the region should come away, while at the same time

Mussalman in the rest of India should go and settle in this territory."[8]

Dr. B. S. Moonje was another prominent Congress leader (he equally dabbled in organizing the Hindu Mahasabha and later helped the RSS in its formation) who carried forward the flag of Hindu Separatism long before Muslim League's Pakistan resolution of March 1940. While addressing the third session of the Oudh Hindu Mahasabha in 1923, he declared:

"Just as England belongs to the English, France to the French, and Germany to the Germans, India belongs to the Hindus. If Hindus get organized, they can humble the English and their stooges, the Muslims … The Hindus henceforth create their own world which will prosper through shuddhi [literally meaning purification, the term was used for conversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism] and sangathan [organization]."[9]

Lala Har Dayal (1884–1938), a well known name in the Ghadar Party circles, too, long before the Muslim League's demand for a separate homeland for Muslims, not only demanded the formation of a Hindu nation in India but also urged the conquest and Hinduisation of Afghanistan. In a significant political statement in 1925, which was published in the Pratap of Lahore, he stated:

"I declare that the future of the Hindu race, of Hindustan and of the Punjab, rests on these four pillars: (1) Hindu Sangathan, (2) Hindu Raj, (3) Shuddhi of Muslims, and (4) Conquest and Shuddhi of Afghanistan and the Frontiers. So long as the Hindu Nation does not accomplish these four things, the safety of our children and great grand children will be ever in danger, and the safety of Hindu race will be impossible. The Hindu race has but one history, and its institutions are homogenous. But the Mussalman and Christians are far removed from the confines of Hindustan, for their religions are alien and they love Persian, Arab, and European institutions. Thus, just as one removes foreign matter from the eye, Shuddhi must be made of these two religions. Afghanistan and the hilly regions of the frontier were formerly part of India, but are at present under the domination of Islam […] Just as there is Hindu religion in Nepal, so there must be Hindu institutions in Afghanistan and the frontier territory; otherwise it is useless to win Swaraj."[10]

All such ideas of declaring India as a Hindu nation and excluding Muslims and Christians from it were theorized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his controversial book Hindutva as early as 1923. According to his definition of the Hindu nation Muslims and Christians remained out of this nationhood because they did not assimilate into Hindu cultural heritage or adopt Hindu religion. Savarkar decreed:

"Christians and Mohamedan [sic] communities, who were but very recently Hindus and in majority of cases had been at least in their first generation most willing denizens of their new fold, claim though they might a common fatherland, and an almost pure Hindu blood and parentage with us can not be recognized as Hindus; as since their adoption of the new cult they had ceased to own Hindu Sanskriti [culture] as a whole. They belong, or feel that they belong, to a cultural unit altogether different from the Hindu one. Their heroes and their hero-worship their fairs and their festivals, their ideals and their outlook on-life, have now ceased to be common with ours."[11]

Savarkar, the originator of the politics of Hindutva, later developed the most elaborate Two-nation theory. While delivering the presidential address to the 19th session Hindu Mahasabha at Ahmedabad in 1937, Savarkar unequivocally declared,

"As it is, there are two antagonistic nations living side by side in India, several infantile politicians commit the serious mistake in supposing that India is already welded into a harmonious nation, or that it could be welded thus for the mere wish to do so. These were well meaning but unthinking friends who take their dreams for realities...Let us bravely face unpleasant facts as they are. India cannot be assumed today to be a unitarian and homogenous nation, but on the contrary there are two nations in the main: the Hindus and the Moslems, in India."[12]

This politics of Two-nation propagated by the Hindutva camp got further impetus with the appearance of M. S. Golwalkar's We or Our Nationhood Defined in 1939. Total assimilation or ethnic cleansing was the mantra prescribed by Golwalkar to deal with the problem of minorities in India. According to him, older nations solved their minorities' problem by not recognising any separate elements in their polity. Muslims and Christians, who were 'emigrants', must get themselves naturally assimilated into the principal mass of population,

the 'national race'. Golwalkar while declaring the determination to cleanse minorities from India on the models of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy where Jews had been almost annihilated warned:

"If they do not do so, they live merely as outsiders, bound by all the codes and conventions of the nation, at the sufferance [sic] of the nation and deserving of no special protection, far less any privilege or rights. There are only two courses open to the foreign elements, either to merge themselves in the national race and adopt its culture, or to live at its mercy so long as the national race may allow them to do so and to quit the country at the sweet will of the national race. That is the only sound view on the minorities' problem. That is the only logical and correct solution. That alone keeps the national life healthy and undisturbed. That alone keeps the nation safe from the danger of a cancer developing into its body politic of the creation of a state within the state. From this standpoint, sanctioned by the experience of shrewd old nations, the foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment not even citizen's rights. There is, at least should be, no other course for them to adopt. We are an old nation; let us deal, as old nations ought to and do deal, with the foreign races, which have chosen to live in our country."[13]

There is no denying the fact, that by the end of 1940s, pre-partition Muslim League, heavily borrowing from the above Hindutva school of thought joined the bandwagon of Two-nation theorists and became a prominent practitioner of this philosophy. Its insistence on Muslims being a separate nation led to the partition of the India.

It is true that on the eve of Independence, India chose to be a secular country but there has been no dearth of Hindu communal elements that still want to practice the philosophy of Savarkar and Golwalkar. They succeeded in demolishing Babri Masjid in 1992, organized carnage of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 and continue working overtime to cleanse Muslims and Christians from areas of their influence. Shockingly, despite a democratic-secular Constitution in force, the Hindutva cadres were able to rule India between 1998-2004. Even otherwise, the Hindu communal elements miss no chance in denigrating minorities specially

Muslims and continue holding them responsible for all ills of the country. They have been able to create a situation in which it seems as if Hindus-Muslims are perennially inimical to each other and cannot co-exist.

The flag-bearers of communal politics in our country take recourse to history to prove that Hindus and Muslims were never united in the past. They insist that historically both of them have been two separate nations. When in history they formed two separate nations is a matter of serious research. However, at least, 150 years back, when the Indian people en-masse arose in revolt against Firangee or the British rule in 1857 this was not the reality. The First Indian War of Independence (1857-59) which was often called 'Mutiny' by the British presented altogether a different scenario, completely at variance from the communal divide setting we see today. The official documents of the period of revolt (like gazetteers, reports and memos), personal narratives and newspapers, which the author has been able to collect from different parts of the globe, tell a fantastic story of the Hindu-Muslim unity in this War. These documents, again and again, underline the reality that broader sections of these two communities were firmly united against the East India Company rule; they fought with united determination and, heroically, laid down their lives together.

Even Savarkar (who later on became a protagonist of Hindu Separatism and agreed to help the British rulers in their game of 'Divide and Rule' by submitting 'Mercy Petitions' in 1914 and accepted conditional release later)[14] in his early phase of political life when he stood for a free India where there would be no religious and political discrimination, he admitted the fact that there was great Hindu-Muslim unity in 1857. His work on the 1857 uprising, The Indian War of Independence, penned in 1907, elaborated the fact that in 1857 Hindus and Muslims were conscious of the fact that unity amongst them was a prerequisite for the liberation of the Motherland.

In fact, his work on 1857 was dedicated to the 'Martyrs of 1857' and the list included names of Mangal Pandey, Rani Laxmi Bai, Nana Saheb, Maulvi Ahmed Shah, Azimullah Khan, Tatia Tope, Bahadurshah Zafar, Begum Zeenat Mahal and many others; both Hindus and Muslims. Savarkar was all praise for the policies of Nana and Azimullah which aimed at uniting Hindus and Muslims so that both of them could fight "shoulder to shoulder for the independence of their country and that, when freedom was gained, the United States of India should be formed under the Indian rulers and princes."[15]

He gave full credits to Azimullah Khan, a close confident of Nana and a great military strategist for preparing a blue print of resistance to the East India Company rule in the following words.

"Of the important characters in the Revolutionary War of 1857, the name of Azimullah Khan is one of the most memorable. Among the keen intellects and minds that first conceived the idea of the War of Independence, Azimullah must be given a prominent place. And among the many plans by which the various phases of the Revolution were developed, the plans of Azimullah deserve special notice."[16]

Savarkar not only hailed the unity of Hindu-Muslim freedom-loving revolutionaries. He went to the extent of praising the Jehadi spirit of Moulvi Ahmed Shah. He wrote:

"The great and saintly Ahmed Shah had woven fine and cleverly the webs of the Jehad—the War of Independence—through every corner of Lucknow and Agra. Kumar Singh, the hero of Jagadishpur, had taken the leadership of his province and, in consultation with Nana, had been busy gathering materials for war. The seeds of the Jehad had taken such root in Patna that the whole city was a regular haunt of the Revolutionary party. Moulvies, Pundits, Zemindars, farmers, merchants, vakils, students of all castes and creeds, were ready to give up their lives for the sake of Swadesh and Swadharma."[17]

The present day flag-bearers of the communal politics in India need to be told that on May 11, 1857 the revolutionary army which declared Bahadur Shah Zafar as the independent ruler of India, consisted of more than 80 percent Hindus. Nana Saheb, Tatia Tope and Laxmi Bai played prominent role in this decision. If there had been any ill-will between these two communities, it would not have been prudent on the part of a predominantly Hindu army to choose a Muslim as its ruler. It may be of interest to know that the command of the revolutionary army was in the hands of Bakht Khan, Sirdhari Lal, Ghaus Mohammed and Heera Singh, a joint team of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs.

This fact of solid Hindu-Muslim unity during this revolt did not escape the attention of the British officials who worked to suppress this

'Mutiny'. Thomas Lowe admitted that "the infanticide Rajput, the bigoted Brahmin, the fanatic Mussalman, and the luxury loving, fat-paunched ambitious Maharattah [sic], they all joined together in the cause; the cow-killer and the cow-worshipper, the pig-hater and the pig-eater, the crier of Allah is God and Mohommed [sic] his prophet and the mumbler of the mysteries of Brahma". [18]

William Howard Russell came to cover 'Mutiny' for The Times, London. He was with the British army, for more than a year, during its campaign to capture Oudh where Birjes Qadar, a Muslim was declared to be the king by the rebels. Russell in a dispatch on March 2, 1858 wrote: "There are, it is said, at least 60,000 regulars of all sorts, and about 70,000 nujeebs [irregulars], militia, and matchlock-men. All the great chiefs of Oudh, Mussalman and Hindu, are there, and have sworn to fight for their young king, Birjeis Kuddr [sic], to the last. Their cavalry is numerous, the city is filled with people, the works are continually strengthened. All Oudh is in the hands of the enemy, and we only hold the ground we cover with our bayonets." [19]

The 'Mutiny' documents in archives are full of instances when both Hindus and Muslims, least concerned about who the leader was, fought as one, fearlessly, and sacrificed down their lives together without hesitation. The unity between the two clearly marks out the fact that at that time Separatism between the two was not an issue. Historian, Maridula Mukherjee is absolutely right when she says that "The behaviour of Hindus and Muslims in the revolt of 1857 was a reflection of the non-communal nature of pre-colonial Indian society."[20]

As we will see in the following, there is a never ending list of united struggles and joint martyrdoms during this War; no area and no battle-ground escaping this reality. The stories being retold here are not based on hearsay but have been collected from the official papers of the period.

Rani Laxmi Bai's fierce fight and great sacrifice is a house-hold story. But what generally is not known is that the commander of her artillery was a Muslim, Ghulam Ghaus Khan and her infantry was led by another brave Muslim, Khuda Baksh. Both of them were martyred on June 4, 1858, defending the fort of Jhansi when a combined force of the Firangees and the Scindias of Gwalior. Unfortunately, we are also unaware of the fact that Rani's personal security officer was a Muslim lady, Mundar [Munzar]. She

could always be seen fighting next to Rani in the battles of Jhansi, Koonch and Kalpi. She died with Rani on June 18, 1858 in the battle of Kotah-ki-Sarai, Gwalior.

After the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 by the Hindutva goons, Ayodhya continues to be a great irritant between the two communities. But in 1857 it was altogether a different scenario. It was in Ayodhya and its vicinity that not only common Muslims and Hindus but also the religious leaders of both the communities jointly arose in revolt and sacrificed lives together. Maulana Amir Ali was a well-known Moulvi of the area and when the chief priest of Hanuman Garhi, Baba Ramcharan Dass took up arms against the British invasion, the former joined it immediately. Both fought gallantly against the British and its stooges inflicting heavy loses to them. They were made prisoners in a battle near Ayodhya and hanged together from a tamarind tree on Kubeer Teela in Ayodhya.

Achhan Khan and Shambhu Prasad Shukla were the other two great friends who organized armed resistance to the British onslaught in the Ayodhya region of Oudh. They led the revolutionary army of Raja Debi Baksh in the region. They were able to defeat the invading army in many battles but were caught due to the treachery of a British spy. They were subjected to prolonged torture and the British commander ordered them to be butchered publicly, so to terrorise those Hindus and Muslims of the area who were jointly fighting the British.

It was this great heritage of Hindu-Muslim unity in Ayodhya in 1857 which greatly unnerved the British imperialist and it is not difficult to understand why Ayodhya was specially chosen by the rulers spread hatred between the two communities.

Kota state (now in Rajasthan) was ruled by a Maharao subservient to the British. The leading courtier of this state was, Lala Jaidayal Bhatnagar, a great literary figure who was equally conversant with Persian, Urdu and English. When found the ruler collaborating with the British he joined hands with the army chief, Mehrab Khan and established a revolutionary government in the state. When Kota was captured by a superior force of the British and stooge neighbouring princes, they together continued fighting in the region till 1859. Betrayed by an informer both were hanged at Kota on September 17, 1860.

Hansi town (now in Haryana) presents another heart-warming example of how Muslims and Jains fearlessly challenged the foreign rule and did not hesitate in sacrificing their lives together. In this town lived two close friends, Hukumchand Jain and Muneer Beg. They were known for literary works and love for mathematics and joined the revolt in the beginning itself. The revolutionary government of Bahadurshah Zafar chose them as advisors and appointed them as commanders in the region of west of Delhi which is known as Haryana today. They led many successful military campaigns in the area but due to the treachery of rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Kapurthala, Kashmir and Pataudi were defeated in a crucial battle and captured. The British were extremely worried and horrified with this kind of unity of the people of two religions that they decided to kill them in a most horrendous and sickening manner. After hanging them on the same tree in Hansi on January 19, 1858, Hukumchand Jain was buried and Muneer Beg was cremated against the custom of their respective religions. It was done with the obvious purpose of making fun of the unity of these two revolutionaries belonging to different religions and show hatred towards their comradeship. Another unspeakable crime committed by the British was that when 13 year old nephew of Hukamchand Jain protested to this treatment he too was hanged, although there was no sentence passed against him.

Malwa region in the then Central Province (now Madhya Pradesh) was another war theatre where big and crucial battles were fought against the British hegemony. It was the joint command of Tatia Tope, Rao Saheb, Laxmi Bai, Ferozshah and Moulvi Fazal Haq, a renowned scholar, which was able to mobilize a huge revolutionary numbering approximately 70-80 thousand. Indian army led by them won innumerable battles against the British and their henchmen. However, in a crucial battle at Ranod on December 17, 1858, when due to the treachery of stooge princes the revolutionary army led by Tatia Tope, Ferozeshah and himself was encircled Moulvi Fazal Haq stood as a rock in the way of advancing British troops. He and his 480 companions laid down their lives but were able to save the main force which included Tatia Tope, Rao Saheb and Ferozshah. Thus saved by the supreme sacrifice by Moulvi Fazl Haq and his comrades, Tatia Tope continued to wage war till the beginning of 1859 and it was due to the treachery of Man Singh, ruler of Narwar, that the British were able to capture him and subsequently hang him on April 18, 1859. Rao Saheb (Pandurang Sadashiv, nephew of Nana Saheb) too continued to wage the struggle and could be captured only in 1862 betrayed by a Maratha chief in Jammu region. He was later hanged in Kanpur. Ferozeshah, fought the

longest, was never captured and traveled to west Asia in search of help from Muslim rulers for India's freedom. Disheartened by their apathy went to Mecca where he died in 1887.

Rohilkhand (present day Bareilly, Shahjahanpur, Badaun etc) was the area which was a strong hold of revolutionaries from the very beginning. Immediately after the announcement of an independent Indian government at Delhi on May 11, 1857, Khan Bahadur Khan was appointed as the viceroy of Mughal emperor there. Khan soon after assuming charge appointed a committee of eight members consisting both Hindus and Muslims to conduct the affairs of the state. His deputy was Khushi Ram. This government forbade cow-killing in deference to the sentiments of local Hindus as was done in Delhi by the orders of General Bakht, chief commander of the revolutionary army. Khan and Khushi Ram led troops defeated the British and their stooges in many battles but were defeated in a crucial battle at Bareilly after remaining in office for almost a year. They continued with the struggle and withdrew towards Nepal but were captured. Both of them were brought to Bareilly and hanged with hundreds of their followers outside old Kotwali on March 20, 1860.

Hindu-Muslim unity during the First Indian War of Independence was not confined to one area or one section of the population. This unity pervaded the whole country at all strata. It was a ground reality and fact of life with which, naturally, women also did not remain untouched. In a small town, Thana Bhawan, situated in Muzaffarnagar district (now in western Uttar Pradesh) 11 brave women belonging to different religions and castes were hanged together or burnt alive for taking up arms against the repressive British rule. The names and heroic deeds of some of them are as follows. Asghari Begum, 45 years old, belonged to a well-to-do family and was burnt alive for organizing rebellion in the area. Another revolutionary woman was, 28 years old, Asha Devi, who belonged to a Hindu Gujar family and was hanged. Another martyred woman was young Bhagwati Devi, born into a Tyagi family of farmers who fought in many battles against the Firangee rule. 24 year old, Habeeba, belonging to a Muslim Gujar family, fearlessly fought in many battles to liberate neighbouring areas from the British tyranny. She was captured while resisting a British attack and was executed on gallows in 1857. Another brave woman from this area was named Mam Kaur who belonged to a family of shepherdess and was hanged at the young age of 25 years. 26 years old, Umda was another gallant woman from this area, born into a Jat Muslim family who sacrificed her life resisting the

British invasion. Raj Kaur born in 1833, hailed from a Sikh family and made the supreme sacrifice fighting against the British in Thana Bhawan area only.

Thana Bhawan was no exception every hook and corner of the country is replete with such instances of fearless fighters, supreme sacrifices of people belonging to different religions. Such glorious instances of unbreakable Hindu-Muslim unity did really happen 150 years back. It can be verified even today by a simple perusal of the British archives, personal collections and narrations of the period. Given these realities of history, it is not difficult to understand why a divide between Hindus and Muslims was necessitated, who were instrumental in accomplishing it and who benefited out of this divide. This natural unity between the followers of two largest religions in 1857 had greatly alarmed and perturbed the British rulers and they could foresee the end of their imperialist project in India. This danger could only be averted if Hindus and Muslims were made to separate and forced to follow opposite directions. The survival of the British Empire in India depended on the successful execution of this strategy. The flag-bearers of the politics of Two-nation in the past and communal politics today are the ones who helped the British to execute this evil design. We should never ignore the fact that communalism was a ploy of the British who feared the end of their Empire in India if Hindus and Muslims continually stood united. On the eve of 150th anniversary of the great rebellion of 1857-1859, we must rise to take pledge of never betraying the shared heritage and shared martyrdoms of the First Indian War of Independence.

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