The First United War of India's Independence

Recounting untold history

Two-day National Seminar

on ROLE OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA'S FREEDOM MOVEMEN

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The First united War of India's Independence or the Indian Rebellion of 1857, as in the British records, also known as the Sepoy Rebellion and the Indian Mutiny was a prolonged period of armed uprisings in different parts of India against British occupation. Small precursors of brewing discontent, as was the plan, involving incidences of arson in cantonment areas began to manifest themselves in January 1857. Later, a large-scale rebellion broke out in May that year and turned into what must be called a full-fledged war of independence in the country. This war brought about the end of the British East India Company's rule in India, and led to fidgety direct rule by the British government (British Raj) of much of the Indian subcontinent for the next 90 years.

In Thana Bhawan, a place under present Muzaffar Nagar district of UP, ulama gathered under the leadership of Haji Imdadullah Muhajire Makki. In May 1857 the famous Battle of Shamli took place between the forces of Haji Imdadullah and the British which ultimately drew an end with complete freedom from British tyrannical clutches after 90 years in August 1947. This January of year 2016 is making 159 years of those untold stories of the heroes of the India's war of freedom. Many of them like Mongal Pandey and Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi, though found tributes in the pages of modern Indian history yet the real braves, the torchbearers; the ulama have been deliberately buried under bigoted attitude of government aided pages of history and await a real recounting from the sons of the soil to whose destiny they bestowed even the last sigh of their lives.

Islam teaches not to subjugate the free will of the people and it exhorts its followers not to submit to oppressive and evil forces. It was this teaching of Islam that inspired ulama of India to wage relentless war against the Company rule following the defeat of the Nawab of Bengal Sirajuddaulah in the Battle of Plassey in 1757.

Some biased historians, who not only ignored ulama's contributions to India's independence, but intentionally maligned Muslim scholars and their educational institutions, branding them anti national or orthodox in a race to please their Western masters in the pre and post independent India. The following statement of a British Army General, Tomson should be an eye opener for those who couldn't see the selfish motive of some so-called writers. The British army general, who fought against Muslims in the uprising of 1857, wrote in his memoir: (*Rebellion Clerics: P-49):*

"If to fight for one's country, plan and mastermind wars against occupying mighty powers are patriotism, then undoubtedly maulvis (read Ulama) were the loyal patriots to their country and their succeeding generations will remember them as heroes."

But here these *maulvis*, unfortunately, happened to be otherwise— let alone remembering them as heroes, their succeeding generations are even questioning their spirit of patriotism.

SHAH WALIULLAH AND HIS MISSION

Shah Waliullah Dehlavi (1703-1762) led a revolution to change the whole system by drawing attention of the people towards degradation of European imperialism and rampant corruption among oriental rulers. During his pilgrimage to Makkah in 1731, Shah Waliullah was inspired by a vision to replace the imperialist and corrupt administration by establishing a government based on principles of equality and justice.

Shah Waliullah (rah) had seen the decline of Mughal rule in India and observed similar degeneration in other countries of Asia and Africa. The last revered and powerful ruler of Mughal dynasty Aurangzeb had already passed away (1707) and East India Company had assumed power to rule a part of Eastern India, defeating Sirajuddaulah at Plassey in 1757.

Ultimately Shah Waliullah came to the conclusion that monarchist and imperialist tendencies were the main causes for worsening state affairs. He formulated certain principles, necessary for the revival of human values. In his book *'Hujjatullahil Baligha'* he laid down those principles i.e. **"labour is the real source of wealth" and "only those who put in the physical and mental labour for the sake of betterment of the society, deserve to possess wealth."** People, he believed, are equal and the position of the ruler of a State is no more than that of a common citizen in matter of justice and freedom. Things like right to freedom, security and property is essential for all, irrespective of religion, race or colour. These ideals were in contrast with those of East India Company in the East and also against Mughal King Shah Alam (II) in Delhi.

It is to be noted that Shah Waliullah (rah) propagated these ideas long before the French, American or Soviet revolutions took place. It is a pity that even today these noble ideas lie buried under the trash of imperialist history that was mainly written to tarnish the image of Muslims and ulama in India. It could be termed as nothing but the tragedy of this nation that a stalwart like Shah Waliullah Dehlavi is deprived of a place in the modern history syllabi of schools and colleges.

MARTYRDOM OF TIPU SULTAN

During the period from 1757 to 1857, Muslims mainly fought organized battles against the mighty British for the freedom of this country. On 4th May, 1799 Tipu Sultan was martyred in the battle of Srirangapatnam. On seeing his dead body Lord Harris gloated: **"Now India is ours."**

Tipu Sultan's martyrdom, although was a serious setback for Indians as almost all of South came under the East India Company taking Madras as the head quarter, yet ulama took it a source of inspiration and began serious planning against imperialist designs in India. They, however, took a realistic view of the situation and came to the conclusion that after Tipu Sultan's death there was no ruler who could challenge the British power. And rightly so, later on history proved that the British occupied the whole of India in a short span of time following Tipu Sultan was martyred.

FIRST EDICT AGAINST THE BRITISH RULE IN INDIA

In 1803, the British captured Delhi from Maratha Empire, defeating Daulat Rao Scindia in the Battle of Delhi. Shah Alam (II), then Mughal King was already powerless and was under a treaty with Marathas. Thus the British set up the rule of the East India Company in the present capital of India, declaring **"people belong to God, country to the King and administration to the Company Bahadur"**.

The common talk in Delhi at that time was, **"the writ of Shah Alam does not run beyond Palam".** At that time Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlavi (1703-1823), the son of Shah Waliullah Dehlavi, issued the first edict (*Fatwa*) against the British rule that proclaimed, **"Our country has been enslaved. To struggle for independence and put an end to the slavery is our duty".**

With this proclamation of Shah Abdul Aziz Dehlavi (rah), the long drawn India's freedom struggle got a new momentum.

SYED AHMAD SHAHEED

Ulama under the leadership of Syed Ahmad (1786-1831), the great martyr of Rai Bareli of UP took the task of executing the edict of Shah Abdul Aziz. The armed struggle against the British occupation started in 1808, when Maharaja Jaswant Rao and Nawab Amir Ali Khan jointly planned to fight against the British forces. Shah Abdul Aziz ordered his disciple Syed Ahamd Shaheed to merge his army with that of Amir Ali Khan. Syed Ahmad Shaheed fought jointly for six years before he came to know that Amir Ali Khan was contemplating to enter in to a pact with the British.

He left Amir Ali Khan and from the year 1818 to 1821 he toured the country to propagate and instill the spirit of independence in the masses. In 1824, he set up his base in the Frontier and began the struggle. Nucleus of freedom fighters met on January 10, 1827 and set up a provisional Government of Free India under the leadership of Syed Ahmad Shaheed.

In a tyrannical system, as the condition existed in those days, this was the first ever bold and courageous move by a representative body to denounce openly the British rule in India.

The Sikh warrior Ranjit Singh, an ally of the British imperialism, invaded North-West Frontier Province of present Pakistan in the year 1818. As the Province fell under Sikh control, it was annexed to Punjab and indirectly fell under the East India Company writ. Syed Ahmad Shaheed and Shah Ismail Shaheed with the help of their army men, including the Swatis, Pashtun tribe of Balakot and Syeds of Kaghan, led many revolts and attacks against the Sikhs. At last on 6th May 1831 during a fierce battle Syed Ahmad Shaheed and Shah Ismail Shaheed along with 300 of their freedom fighters were martyred. Thus the ulama leaders of the freedom struggle paid price of united free India through their lives and were defeated in the battle of Balakot by the East India Company ally – the Sikh Empire.

Unfortunately the biased historians later named that battle as the religious fights between Muslims and Sikhs owing to the divide and rule conspiracy of British, thus

minimizing the contribution of ulama and deepening the gulf between Muslims and Sikhs in India.

Even after this setback, companions of the two great martyrs carried on with the struggle for nearly half a century. Ulama of Sadiqpur continued their relentless struggle and went on fighting in the Frontier region for more than two decades between the year 1845 and 1871.

THE HISTORIC REVOLT OF 1857

Indian freedom fighters kept on fostering anti imperialism revolt all over the country since the fall of Delhi in 1803. In 1857 another edict for *Jihad* (call for war as religious obligation for Muslims) was issued. The Fatwa carried the signature of 34 ulama. Prominent among them were Maulana Qasim Nanautavi, the founder of Darul Uloom Deoband, Maulana Rasheed Ahmad Gangohi and Hafiz Zamin Shaheed who fought the British army under the leadership of Haji lmdadullah at Shamli battle and the later got martyrdom.

Threatened by such a radical turn of events, the British rulers poured in immense resources in arms and men to suppress the struggle. Although the rebels fought back heroically - the betrayal by a number of rulers such as the Sikh princes, the Rajasthani princes and Maratha rulers like Scindia allowed the British to prevail. Lord Canning (the first Governor-General and Viceroys of India) noted that "If Scindia joins the rebels, I will pack off tomorrow". Later he was to comment: "The Princes acted as the breakwaters to the storm which otherwise would have swept us in one great wave". Such was the crucial importance of the betrayal of the Indian princes.

The British were also helped by the conservatism of the trading communities, especially Brahmins and Marwaris, who were unwilling to put up with the uncertainties of a long drawn out rebellion.

But equally important was the superior weaponry and brutality of the British in defending their Company Rule. British barbarity in suppressing the uprising was unprecedented. After the fall of Lucknow on May 8, 1858 Frederick Engels commented:
"The fact is, there is no army in Europe or America with so much brutality as the British. Plundering, violence, massacre - things that everywhere else are strictly and completely banished - are a time honoured privilege, a vested right of the British soldier..."
(The Indian Encyclopedia, Subodh Kapoor - 2002)

In Awadh alone 150,000 people were killed - of which 100,000 were civilians. The great Urdu poet, Mirza Ghalib wrote from Delhi, **"In front of me, I see today rivers of blood".** He went on to describe how the victorious army went on a killing spree - **'killing every one in sight - looting people's property as they advanced'.**

Bahadur Shah's three sons were publicly executed at "Khooni Darwaaza" in Delhi and Bahadur Shah himself was blinded and exiled to Rangoon in present Burma where he died in 1862. Refusing to plead for mercy from the British, he courageously retorted: **"The power of India will one day shake London if the glory of self-respect remains undimmed in the hearts of the rebels".**

Thomas Lowe wrote: "To live in India now was like standing on the verge of a volcanic crater, the sides of which were fast crumbling away from our feet, while the boiling lava was ready to erupt and consume us"

Nevertheless, the revolt of 1857 or the first united war of India's independence was apparently failed and thus Indians could not resist a long armed battle against the mighty British army. Ulama, thereafter, became the main target of the British oppression and persecution. The words like '*Maulvi'* and *'Mullah'* were synonymous to '*rebel*' in the British eyes. Out of approximately 200,000 people martyred during the revolt, roughly 51,200 were ulama alone. It means more than a quarter of total martyred of 1875 revolt against British rule in India were ulama only. Edward Timus admitted that in Delhi alone 500 ulama were hanged to death.

There were five major sedition cases against the ulama during the period between 1864 and 1871. The sedition cases were generally known as **'the Wahabi Cases'** or the **'Ambala Conspiracy Cases'**. In all these cases the accused were either sentenced to death or to life imprisonment. Tomson, as stated above, the British army general who fought against Indians in the 1857 revolt, detailed in his memoir, *Rebellion Cleric*, and honestly accepted that the real heroes of the 1857 revolt of India against East India Company were none other than ulama, (*maulvis* in his word).

BIRTH OF DARUL ULOOM DEOBAND

After the defeat of 1857, some of the prominent Muslim leaders of the freedom movement found it very hard to save India from the cultural onslaught of the British. The battlefield defeats of freedom fighters under the central leadership of last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar brought about major changes and direct British Rule was established. The system of governance was instituted on June 28, 1858, when the rule of the British East India Company was transferred to the Crown in the person of Queen Victoria, and she later in 1876, was proclaimed as Empress of India.

To counter the nefarious British plan to enslave India culturally, some of the ulama planned to establish a revolutionary institution that would impart knowledge as well as enthuse fervor among students to fight against oppressive and occupying forces. Darul Uloom Deoband, the most eminent Islamic learning centre thus was established in 21st May 1866. Maulana Muhammad Qasim Nanautavi (1832-1879), the founder of 'Darul Uloom' (house of knowledge) at Deoband, later on outlined the purpose of establishing the institution in the following words:

> *"The English have perpetrated boundless acts of tyranny against the Muslims for their fault, if at all it was a fault, of the uprising in 1857 and their relentless endeavour for the independence of this country thereafter. They have left no stone unturned to plunder and obliterate the Islamic arts and science, Muslim culture and civilization. Endowments of Muslim educational institutions have been confiscated and as a result state funded schools have been virtually closed. It is therefore, necessary to adopt other method instead of relying upon the old system of endowments."*

The negative approach adopted by the British historians of the past, and even present day Western historians to paint ulama and their struggle against oppressive Western forces into bad colours is understandable. What is not understandable is the purpose of poisonous writings of the present-day votary of Hindutva movement like Mr. Arun Shourie and others. We simply cannot believe that these historical facts are hidden from them.

INDIA IS STILL PAYING THE PRICE OF DIVIDE AND RULE POLICY OF BRITISH

The 1857 revolt, which had forged an unshakable unity amongst Hindus and Muslims alike, was an important milestone in our freedom struggle - providing hope and inspiration for future generations of freedom lovers. All Hindus and Muslims were fighting under a single command and control for a single cause – FREEDOM from British tyranny. That shocked the British; they learnt that a unity among Indians would be irresistible in future.

Thus, the aftermath of the 1857 brought about dramatic changes in colonial rule as stated earlier. In addition to change of governance from proxy to direct British Rule, the British embarked on a furious policy of **"Divide and Rule",** fomenting religious hatred as never before. Resorting to rumors and falsehoods, they deliberately recast Indian history in highly communal colors and practised malicious communal politics to divide the Indian masses. Hateful history books portraying successful and pious Mughal rulers like Babar and Aurangzeb were compiled in that period of time.

All practicing Muslim rulers were shown as anti-Hindu and repressive against their citizens whereas those fond of *Darbaris* and lavish were given importance in the pages of Indian history, thus creating communalism and hate among Hindus and Muslims. Shuddhi Karan Movement by Arya Samaj, which later shaped into Bhartiya Hindu Shuddhi Mahasabha' (Indian Hindu Purification Council) in 1923 to work as what today the Sang Privar is doing in the name of Gharwapsi was also among the plots of ‘divide and rule’ conspiracy of British Raj in India.

That legacy continues to plague the sub-continent till today. However, if more people become aware of the colonial roots of this divisive communal gulf - it is possible that some of the damage done to Hindu-Muslim unity could be reversed. If Hindus and Muslims could rejoin and collaborate in the spirit of 1857, the sub-continent may yet be able to unshackle itself from it's colonial past – say British and American hegemony this day.

Let's have a real recounting of our strength in India— the unity in diversity— and make meaningful salutations to all our heroes alike. Year 1857 was a time for united war against British tyrants and 2016, after 159 years, should bring real smiles to all the brave souls – ulama, Muslims, Hindu and Sikhs who gifted us the 'FREEDOM'.

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