

## Role of the Wahabis in the Revolt of 1857 at Patna

Shubhi Srivastava\*

The news of the outbreak at Meerut had caused widespread disquiet in the outstations of Bihar. Bihar posed a tough problem for company's authorities. Patna was fast assuming a mutinous grab at the instance of Mohammadans of the wahabi sect. The activities of Wahabism in Patna went a great way in preparing Bihar for the mutinous outbreak.<sup>1</sup> Wahabism, so called after called after its founder, Muhammad wahab, who was born at Ayaina in Arab in 1703.<sup>2</sup>

Wahabism made its appearance in India in early nineteenth century as a religious movement and attacked the 'religious corruptions', which had crept into the Muslim society. In India it had a special appeal, as many of the converts from Hindustan had brought over their new faith, ideas and practices which were contrary to the spirit of Islam. Wahabism fiercely advocated a return of simplicity of faith and society of the prophet's Arabia and rejected all accretion to and declension from the pure Islam.<sup>3</sup>

The Movement, however, soon transferred itself into religious-political creed and it was ambitious of its founder Syed Ahamad of Rai Bareilly to revive and restore Muslim power in India by overthrowing the Sikhs in Punjab and British in Bengal.<sup>4</sup> It is essential to note, wahabism as preached by Syed Ahmad was not a separate religion as has been simulated by some of the English writers, especially Hunter who refer to wahabi movement as the religion to Syed Ahamad as the prophet and the Sirat-i-Mustaqim as the new Quran of the sect.<sup>5</sup>

As far as the theory of the influence of Arabian Wahabism on its Indian Counterpart there is no documentary evidence or authoritative proof. The fact is that there are certain similarities between the two movements owing to their, both being inspired by the Quran and Hadis. But at the same time there are certain important points of difference between the two. The first was the markedly political aspect of movement in India, which was completely absent in Arabia. Another distinctive feature of the Indian Wahabism was its identification, at one stage, with the Mahawadi movement, which was also never in evidence in Arabia.<sup>6</sup>

By 1820 the Wahabi movement was widely prevalent in Bengal, the north-west frontier, united provinces and its spread even in southern India up to Madras.<sup>7</sup> The anti-British attitude of Syed Ahamad was clear as 1817 when he gave up the service of the Nawab of Tonk as latter became a feudatory of the British. Beside this, his collection of letters, preserved in the British museum, throws some light on the relations with the Hindus. In its political aspect the movement of Syed Ahamed had a definite anti-British base and he was to elicit Hindu support and co-operation in his struggle.<sup>8</sup>

It is also important to know about the military position of British at Bihar before discussing the movement of wahabi. The waterline between Calcutta and Allahabad, About 664 miles in length, had one weak middle point at Danapur and Patna, two only twelve miles apart. Danapur was approximately in Calcutta between Calcutta and Allahabad. It was 344 miles from Calcutta. At Danapur there were three native regiments, the 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> N.I., One company of European, one of Native Artillery and 10<sup>th</sup> foot.<sup>9</sup> It was certain that should the three regiment's native break away, as their comrades in other places had broken during the movement of 1857, a great danger would be consisted for Bihar itself, and possibly for Calcutta.<sup>10</sup>

The political importance location of the of Bihar lay in the fact that different parts of it had more or less easy access to the Ganges, and the Grand Trunk road ran through a large

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\* Assistant professor, Dept. of History, St. Andrews Degree College, Gorakhpur.

part of the province, so that untoward incidents endangering the safety of the province which have cut off the two great highways of the upper provinces.

The strategic importance of Bihar from the point of view lay in its immense opium cultivation, the Quality of manufactured and partially manufactured opium in the go downs of Patna in the large and scattered treasuries, almost unprotected, so likely that in case of mutiny all such government property in Bihar was likely to fall in hands of mutineers.<sup>11</sup> G.B. Malleson writes: "The province, Western Bihar of which Patna was the capital, was one of the richest provinces in India. It contained a considerable number of Native land owners, men of large estates and ancient lineage. English merchants too had invested large sum in the province in the cultivation of indigo, one of its staple exports. It touched on the one side the North-west, the revolt district of Ghazipur, Azamgarh, Jaunpur and Mirzapur, the north, it touched Nepal ; to the east , the division of eastern Bihar, Not only combustible itself , but open to invasion by the sipahis in Eastern Bengal , then in a state of incipient mutiny."<sup>12</sup>

Militarily speaking Bihar stood defenceless in the sense that the province was garrisoned mainly by native regiments with an almost negligible percentage of European forces to exercise my effective control over them.<sup>13</sup> Before the arrival of reinforcement from Persia, Ceylon and Burma, the European regiments at Danapur was the only English regiment in the long line between Calcutta and Lucknow.<sup>14</sup> Having in view the extent of the country it had to guard the area of western Bihar alone comprehending 2101 square miles, with the population of upwards of a million and a half its proximity to the influential city of Patna, to the fact that many of the landowners of Bihar were commanding a large following, Kaye and Malleson writes:" It seems strange that the that the expedient of disarming the native troops was not at once resorted to here. The postponement of such a measure necessarily chained the European troops to the station of Danapur , leaving all the other districts in Patna divisions to shift for themselves".<sup>15</sup>

Long before the actual outbreak of revolt of 1857, conspiracies had been systematically and extensively carried on in Patna and the neighboring territories; men were engaged and regularly paid: subscription to finance mutinous preparations were raised and the collection distributed; and communications maintained with the evidence and obvious purpose of declaring a general Crusade against the British in India and helping the restoration of the mohammadan sovereignty.<sup>16</sup>

At the commencement of the mutiny such Wahabi leaders of Patna as Peer Ali, waris Ali, Ali Kareem, Luft Ali Khan and the three maulvis-Mohammad Husain, Ahamadullah and waizul Haq kept the city in readiness for mutiny at the slightest provocation .<sup>17</sup>

The great aim of Peer Ali in accordance with the instructions of his collaborators, Masilhuzzaman of Lucknow , was to effect a coordination of the activities of their distinct groups to harmonize the comparatively diffused feeling of discontent into a powerful and comparatively diffused feeling of discontent into a powerful and homogenous movement against the government . The letters of Masilhuzzaman to Pir Ali, Many of which were sized after the suppression of the rising bear ample testimony of his efforts for achieving this object.<sup>18</sup>

The Wahabis were said to be engaged in a general conspiracy against the government. On the 12<sup>th</sup> June a Najib was found spreading sedition among Rattary's Sikhs. He was tried found guilty and hanged.<sup>19</sup> Taylor tells that he could wait no longer. He could not bring the wahabis leaders to court, "for actual evidence of their direct complicity in any of the conspiracies that had lately taken place is not such at present as to warrant any legal proceedings against them".<sup>20</sup>

In these circumstances Mr. William Taylor, commissioner of Patna determined to strike at root of disaffection by arresting the three Maulvis who were as the head of Patna branch of

Wahabis .He was however, afraid of arresting them openly for it might have led to resistance, which Mr. Taylor was careful to avoid.<sup>21</sup> Along with a few respectable citizen of Patna, the Maulvis were invited by Taylor to his house for consultation on the state of affair on 18<sup>th</sup> June.<sup>22</sup> The next morning (June 19<sup>th</sup>) the honorable citizens presented themselves including Ahamadullah, Mohammad Husain and waizul Haq. When they had assembled Taylor himself entered, accompanied by the collector, captain Rattray, subedar Hidayat Ali and few others.<sup>23</sup> When the conference was over he allowed the others to depart, the Maulvis were detained as hostages for the good behavior of their followers and were handed over to the custody of captain Rattray . Soon after they were dispatched under an escort of the Sikh regiment to the circuit house where they were put under detention.<sup>24</sup> about of he Maulvis, Taylor Comments. "To this day I look at the detention of these men as the one of the most successful strokes of policy which I was able to carry into execution".<sup>25</sup> Malleison found nothing wrong in this proceeding. Taylor's, he argues ,” represented the governing power of the land ‘ they were not Mr. Taylor’s guests, they went to his house to here the voice of the Government they served, and the voice ordered them to remain in honorary confinement so long as crisis might last.”<sup>26</sup>

Taylor’s own Justification was, “ I took possession of these leading men , therefore , more for the purpose of holding them as hostage for the good conduct of their whole brotherhood , than with the expectation of having sufficient evidence to punish them ; and it was bold , and perhaps a danger stroke , and several of more timid though it might led to resistance , I counted the cost , am thankful to say that the result has more then answered my expectations.”<sup>27</sup> S.N. Sen rightly remarks about the whole remarks about the whole episode and expresses his view “It was no doubt a dangerous stroke but bold it was not. It needed no courage to invite unsuspecting men to one’s residence and put them under arrest when they were not in a position to resist ...apologists of Taylor including Malleison triumphantly point out that there was a Wahabi conspiracy eight years latter and Maulvi Ahamadullah, one of the three Wahabi leaders arrested by Taylor on 20th June, was convicted to treason on that occasion. The Maharaja of Dumraon was a suspect at one time and so was the Rani of Tikari. The rich Zamidars had an anxious a time as their British rulers and had to provide for the safety of their lives and property, if they dug out rusty guns or recruited armed retainer they were suspected of treasonable designs”.<sup>28</sup>

The arrest of these leaders certainly upset the Wahabhi arrangement for transmission of money to frontier where as result, acute privation prevailed .But Taylor was wrong in his assertion that this act withheld the Wahabis from joining in the movement of 1857. Taylor seems to have been obsessed with the idea that it was his preventive detention of the Wahabi leaders, coupled with the unconcealed threat of Elahi Bux, which held the Wahabi group in check during those crucial days.<sup>29</sup>

The arrest of three Maulvis was followed up by the arrest of Maulvis mehdi, the patrolling magistrate of Patna, strongly suspected to connivance with the disaffected .<sup>30</sup>On 20<sup>th</sup> June, Mr. Taylor issued a proclamation calling upon all citizens to deliver up their arms, within twenty four hours and another forbidding all citizens to remain after 9 p.m. <sup>31</sup>these measurers were to a great extent successful. The disaffected were deprived for their most trusted leaders; several thousands strands of arms were peaceably delivered up and nightly meetings of conspirators ceased. But crisis was not over. Three days after proclamation a corporal of the native police, Warris Ali was arrested in Tirhut .upon his person was found a bundle of letters implicating in the rebellion movement one Ali Karim, an influential Muslim residing nine miles from Patna. Mr. Taylor dispatched the Magistrate of Patna; Mr. Lowis to arrest him but Ali Karim was successful to escape.<sup>32</sup>

Patna was not destined to remain tranquil. On the evening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> July, some two hundred muslim led by Pir Ali, a bookseller, noted for his enthusiasm for his religion, paraded streets with the green flags and music.<sup>33</sup> They marched towards the Roman Catholic situated in the heart of city. Mr. Taylor immediately directed captain Rattray, attended by magistrate, Mr. J.M. Lewis to march down with 150 sikhs for protection of residence. But before they could reach the scene Dr. R. Lyell, the principal assistance the opium agent of Bihar, was shut down and beheaded.<sup>34</sup> After this incident, Kaye and Malleson mentions that they moved towards with renewed enthusiasm, their numbers being augmented at at every stop and after sometimes they were found themselves face to face with Rattray's 150 sikhs.<sup>35</sup> The wahabi followers were then dispersed and one of them killed and another severely wounded. Consequent on the failure of the attempted rising the ring leaders were sought to be to be arrested and the city underwent complete search.<sup>36</sup> Thirty one were apprehended amongst were Pir Ali , the actual leader , Seikh Ghuseeta, Jamadar of looft Ali Khan, the richest banker of Patna and looft Ali khan himself.<sup>37</sup>

The arrested persons were not sent to an ordinary court of Law but produced before a commission consisting of Taylor and Lewis, magistrate of Patna.<sup>38</sup> Taylor indirectly admits that the "necessity of cross examination" and the Punctilios of judicial ceremonies were not permitted.<sup>39</sup> One of the thirty one who were seized fourteen were hanged in company with a man named Waris Ali, Jamadar of Mr. Ali Karim , a man of great wealth , large estate and and corresponding influence .<sup>40</sup>

The sentence was signed by Taylor alone. Samuells, Taylor's successor suspected that the sentenced was passed on sufficient evidence and the papers were referred to the Nizamat Adalat. The Judges confined enquiry to cases of imprisonment and flogging only, and their finding was against Taylor.<sup>41</sup> Lewis disavowed in writing his responsibility for most of the sentences. The government general recorded in his minute of the 4<sup>th</sup> march, "I believe that in the course of Mr. Taylor's proceedings men were condemned and executed upon insufficient evidence", but in view of Taylor's intended resignation he was unwilling to order a public enquiry , unless Taylor himself wanted it .<sup>42</sup> But Taylor's policy of constant arrest and continued hangings was warmly supported by the mercantile community of Calcutta whose commercial interests had every chance of being jeopardized in case of rising in district of Tirhut for which Patna and Danapur were two important stations.<sup>43</sup>

Many historians hold the view that the Wahabi movement was confined to dissatisfaction Muslim masses and it had no popular basis. Edward Lockwood holds the view that it would be unjust to hold the view that the district of Patna as a whole had been mutiny minded and up in arms. The rural populations of the district did not share in mutinous spirit of sepoys.<sup>44</sup>

The total failure of the attempted rising of 3<sup>rd</sup> july 1857 signified the unwillingness or inability of masses of the people of Patna to join the movement against the government. The movement of Patna was mainly the work of Wahabi leaders and they failed to gain support of their own community and people like subedar Hidayat Ali and others helped authorities to suppress the movement.

R.C. Majumdar gave more importance to absence of the Wahabis as opponent of an English as an important factor to the reckoned with. To say in words of Dr. Majumdar: This violently anti-British military organization (the wahabis) practically kep0t aloof from the great revolutionary movement of the 1857. It was obvious that the strong military organizations of the Wahabis at Sittana could have rendered great service to the cause of mutiny by attacking the British in north west as that would have considerably hampered, If not altogether stopped, the constant flow of men and money from Punjab to Delhi.<sup>45</sup>

Dr. Sen also expresses the same view. He comments "like many of their countrymen individual Indian Wahabis might have participated in the revolt of 1857, but if the community as such had decided to cast in their lot with the sepoy leaders, Sir John Lawrence would have found it to denude the Punjab of European troops and recruit so many Punjabi Muslims to fight for the cause of the British".<sup>46</sup>

But it is incorrect to maintain that the Wahabis did not fight against the British at all during the crucial years of 1857 revolt. Although it is true that they did not join hands with the leader of the movement, but their frontier party, Under Enayat Ali constantly fought against the English during the period. But the superior better organized resources of the English, which helped them to meet the challenges of so many scattered 'centers of the revolt' all over northern India, enabled them to meet this one additional source of trouble as well. Material and technological superiority was the one crucial advantage possessed by the English over the Indian opponents and it could not have been materially affected by the action of the Wahabis. It is also true that whole of Punjab was not a Wahabi sphere of influence and the latter could in no way be held responsible for the attitude of the general people of land.

It is thus true that the significance of the continuing process of anti-English activities of Wahabi has not been properly brought out. Prof. Irfan Habib has rightly remarks: "In northern India the Wahabis were already spreading the net of propaganda about the English being an enemy of the faith against whom jihad or holy war was enjoyed. Then actually contributed warriors called jihadis to the revolt: many of these, including persons from amongst 'weaver, artisans and other earners', joined Bakht Khan, the rebel commander in Delhi".<sup>47</sup>

The greatest contribution of the Wahabis to the movement was that they prepared ideological platform to the movement. Denying the contribution of the Wahabis in the national movement would be greatest injustice to all those Patna rebels and leaders, who had lost their hearths and homes, spent their days in prison, and also to those persons who were executed for revolt.

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