

The Revolt of 1857: Role of District Aligarh

Abstract

The revolt of 1857 was the first uprising, which spread throughout India. The revolt of 1857 was an important event in the Indian as well as world history because it not only shocked the British Government but also questioned the legality of colonial rule in India and other parts of the world. Unquestionably, 1857 was the greatest challenge to colonial rule during the entire course of the nineteenth century. Attracting people from all walks of life, it triggered demands for radical, social and economic reforms, calling for new society that would be more democratic and more representative of popular demands. The most prominent feature of the revolt of 1857 was the Hindu-Muslim unity. The heritage of Hindu-Muslim unity set an example for the nationalist of the twentieth century and so. In this paper, an attempt is being made to describe the events occurred in district Aligarh during 1857.

Keywords: Revolt, Doab, British Rule, Mutiny, Cavalry, Rebels.

Introduction

The Revolt of 1857, a watershed in the history of British rule in India, shook the very foundation of the British Empire in India. It changed the character of British rule, marking the end of the rule of the East India Company and bringing British India directly under the British Crown. The outbreak of 1857 would surely go down in history as the great and direct challenge to the British rule in India, on an extensive scale and a manifestation of spontaneous unity of Hindus and Muslims which came from shared lives. It inspired the genuine national movement for the freedom of India from British yoke which started half a century later.

Objectives of the Study

Through this paper, an attempt is being made to understand, analyse and present before the nation, meaning and message of this epoch making event of nineteenth century in right perspective and thus remove misgivings prevalent in the society as its being a failed revolution in regards to this first war of Indian Independence.

Main Events occurred in Aligarh during Revolt 1857

The history of Aligarh during the great revolt of 1857 is full of incidents, but is somewhat disconnected owing to the fact that the main highway of the Doab runs through the district, which in consequence witnessed the continual passage and repassage of freedom fighters, in most instances with a pursuing British army at their heels. On the eve of the outbreak, Aligarh was in the charge of Watson (the Collector) and the military garrison comprised 300 men of the 9th Indian Infantry under Major Eld. News of the mutiny at Meerut arrived at Aligarh on the 12th of May 1857¹ and caused much uncertainty and alarm, but nothing definite occurred beyond the burning of an empty bungalow.

On 20th of May, a Brahmana named Narayana, belonging to neighboring village of Koil, was found tempering with the loyalty of the sepoys and was sentenced to death the same evening.² The sentence was carried out before the whole regiment of the 9th Indian Infantry stationed at Aligarh.³ The troops remained impassive till one of them stepped forward and exclaimed: "Behold a martyr to our religion." The effect was instantaneous. The 9th Indian infantry broke out into open revolt, dismissed their officers and compelled them and the civil residents to quit Aligarh. They then plundered the treasury, opened the jail and marched off in a body to Delhi. The Europeans escaped with their lives under escort of a small detachment, which had just arrived at Aligarh.

On the following day news of the Aligarh mutiny had reached Agra⁴ and Captain Alexander was at once dispatched with the 1st Gwalior cavalry to secure the main road to the north. Alexander sent ahead Lieutenant Cockburn to rescue the fugitives at Hathras and this task was

Jitendra Singh Naulakha

Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of Ancient History,
K. N. Govt. P.G. College,
Gyanpur, Bhadohi

successfully affected. But on the 24th of May hundred of his men rose in revolt and rode off to stir up the villagers in the neighbourhood.

Meanwhile a party under Lieutenant Greathed reached Hathras on the 29th of May, affecting the rescue of few other Europeans who had been shut up in the Maloi indigo factory. The same day they occupied Aligarh and took possession of the district headquarters, Watson assuming charge of the district. On the 1st of June the Collector rode by night to Khair, where Rao Bhopal Singh and his Chauhans had deposed the tahsildar and proclaimed a Rajput Government.⁽⁵⁾ He rode boldly through the town with a few followers, entered the tahsil and surprised Rao Bhopal Singh. The leader was promptly hanged on the spot and the party returned to Aligarh. About the middle of June the Chauhans, joined by the Jats of Tappal, re-occupied Khair and plundered and destroyed nearly all the government buildings.⁽⁶⁾

On the 21st of June, most of the British troops were recalled to Agra and Watson was left with a few men. This little force was wholly insufficient to defend the turbulent city of Aligarh. At this very time the freedom fighters from Avadh and elsewhere were constantly passing through Grand Trunk Road and were too strong to be met in open fight. Watson therefore retired to the deserted factory at Madrak, where he was in touch of Captain Burlton at Sasni and Captain Alexander at Hathras. From Madrak he continued to make expeditions against the rebellious villagers, but towards the end of June, he received information of the intended mutiny of Gwalior troops. A more immediate cause for the alarm was the news on the 30th June that Muslims of Koil had raised the green flag and had sworn to bring back the heads of Europeans and affix them to gates of the city.

On the 1st of July the Gwalior cavalry had mutinied at Hathras.⁷ The men of the Gwalior cavalry showed no ill feeling towards their officers, but simply told them to go Alexander with a few others had no choice but to ride off to Agra.⁸ The next day the same thing happened with captain Burlton's detachment at Sasni. The revolt of the last remaining troops convinced Watson that further delay was idle. He and his party proceeded to Iglas. From Iglas he marched to Agra but on the way he lost two men of his small force. Watson himself died of cholera soon after reaching Agra.

A new government was established with a panchayat headed by Muhammad Ghaus Khan of Sikandara Rao, who proclaimed himself subedar of the emperor of Delhi, collected revenue and exercised the prerogative of royalty. Others who occupied important positions in the new set-up were Nasimullah Khan who was placed in charge of the city, Mahbub Khan, the tahsildar and Hasan Khan, the kotwal.⁹ There was indeed much rivalry between the leaders and some tension between the communities, which weakened the revolutionary command. Meanwhile the old Jat and Rajput feuds broke out; indeed, the people indulged in far excesses towards one another than towards the Europeans.¹⁰

On the other hand there also some landlords who throughout the disturbances displayed their loyalty to the British, Gobind Singh, the son of the famous Days Ram of Hathras, and his followers were employed constantly on police escort and intelligence duties. He joined Major Montgomery, who arrived at Hathras on the 24th of August. Montgomery reached Aligarh on the 24th of August in morning of that day, found Muhammad Ghaus Khan and his troops near the town in an enclosure known as Man Singh garden. The opposing force comprised a large body of *ghazis* and a detachment of 3rd cavalry. The *ghazis* of Aligarh played a great part in the rebellion by exciting the people to fury and urging them to fight to death in that war against the "infidels." It was most desperate hand-to hand fight. Nearly sixty *ghazis*, mad with rage, rushed sword in hand but all were killed. Among them was Abdul Jalil, the maulavi of Aligarh. The fighters for freedom were driven out of Aligarh.¹¹ but the city was not fully occupied till the 28th of August. Cocks, who accompanied the British force, assumed the charge of the district, but on the retirement of the troops to Hathras, on the 4th of September, the city was made over to Gobind Singh. This arrangement answered very well for a time, but trouble again ensued after the capture of Delhi, which let loose a flood of Indian troops in the Doab. The local *Bargujars* caused great trouble and remained in occupation of the town till September, 1857. In the same month, however, the British government appointed one Muhammad Ali as Joint magistrate to appease the freedom fighters, The *Bargujars* refused to acknowledge his authority and on the 25th of September they rose and murdered Muhammad Ali at the gate of the tahsil Atrauli. As a consequence of this several freedom fighters were hanged later on.

Koil, however was speedily reoccupied by the British on the 5th of October. Colonel Greathed entered Koil without much opposition and the freedom fighters fled down the Grand trunk Road. Various other bodies of fighters for freedom afterwards passed through on several occasions, but the district remained substantially in British possession.¹² in the beginning of December news came of the advance of the Fatehgarh fighting sepoys, who had reached Kasganj. Their Progress was so slow that Colonel Seaton, who was taking a large convoy from Delhi down the Grand trunk Road, was enabled to reach Aligarh by the 11th of December. Leaving his convoy under the fort walls and taking with him a hundred men, he marched his troops to Gangiri, where Colonel Farquhar, who had come from Bulandshahar by way of Atrauli and Chharra, was watching the rebels with a small force. The Indian troops in fact received a greater surprise since they imagined they had only to deal with Farquhar's troops. They fled and the British occupied the town of Kasganj. The exploits of Seaton cleared the pressure of the freedom fighters on Aligarh and the month of March 1858 saw gradual restoration of order and the British rule.¹³

Then commenced an era of most violent repressions and reprisals. The landholders who had taken part in the disturbances were guilty in most cases of isolated acts of plunder rather than of overt

rebellion against the government; but the punishment were heavy in as much as 8,867 hectares of land were confiscated. Of this 2,351 hectares were in Atrauli and 451 in Hathras.¹⁴

Conclusion

Last but not least, I can assume that it has been said that '*Julius Caesar dead was more powerful than Julius Caesar alive*,' the same may be said about the Revolt of 1857. Whatever might have been its original character; it soon became a symbol of challenge to the mighty British Empire in India and remained a shining star for the rise and growth of the Indian national movement.

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