

Peoples' History: Some Ignored Heroes of the War of 1857

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Abstract

1857 war is one of the great resistance against invaders and over the years the facilitators of invaders have been glorified in our curriculum. The colonial and imperialist powers viewed, recorded, and interpreted the history and past of the conquered people, keeping in mind their own interests. They wanted to justify their colonization. There is a dire need to reinterpret the history of colonial politics in the light of local traditions, with new angles such as oral traditions, representing the dissenting voices of the people. War of Independence of 1857, as the British and pro-British historians called it mutiny, was the important event of our history. The Centre of this war was the Northern part of India but in the Punjab at many places the Sepoys and the civil population rose against the British. According to Robert Montgomery, the financial commissioner of the Punjab, events of revolt occurred in the Punjab at 12 places. At some places civil population also fought against the British. Major events of civil resistance took place at Muree and Gugera.

Keywords: Resistance, sepoys, freedom fighters, folklore, Muree and Gugera

Introduction

Folklore is an essential element of oral history to construct an alternative history. Folk songs reflect the world-view of the common people, and sometimes challenge the narrative presented in the official records or the statist discourse. Quite often an individual painted as a villain in the official historical narratives is remembered as a hero in the folklore. The heroes of the people are dubbed as rebels, and the ruling elite tend to make people forget them by erasing their achievements from the memories of the people. However, quite contrarily, the folklore tries to keep their memory alive.

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The tragedy of a nation is distorted history. The fouls are transformed into facts, foes into friends, sinners into saints, looters into saviours and oppressive regimes into shadows of Almighty. Local heroes are hated and local people are enslaved mentally as well.

1857 war is one of the great resistance against invaders and over the years the facilitators of invaders have been glorified in our curriculum. The colonial and imperialist powers viewed, recorded, and interpreted the history and past of the conquered people, keeping in mind their own interests. They wanted to justify their colonization. There is a dire need to reinterpret the history of colonial politics in the light of local traditions, with new angles such as oral traditions, representing the dissenting voices of the people.

War of Independence of 1857, as the British and pro-British historians called it mutiny, was the important event of our history. The Centre of this war was the Northern part of India but in the Punjab at many places the Sepoys and the civil population rose against the British. According to Robert Montgomery, the financial commissioner of the Punjab the events of revolt occurred in the Punjab at 12 places.¹ At some places civil population also fought against the British. Major events of civil resistance took place at Muree and Gugera.² Unfortunately our text books ignored these events and the local heroes who sacrificed their lives for the sake of freedom. A brief introduction of those heroes is as under.

Rai Ahmed Khan Kharral Shaheed

Rai Ahmed Khan belonged to Opera branch of Kharrals. He was born in 1776 at Jhamra now a town in district Faisalabad. His father name was Rai Nathu Khan Kharral. In the name of Bajay Khan, this family was known as Bajay Kay Kharral. Rai Ahmed Khan was the leader of freedom fighters and according to N.W. Elphinstone, Deputy Commissioner of Gugera, he had been the chief instigator of the movement, his reputation for success in former insurrections was considerable and his influence over the clans on the Ravi unbounded.³

¹ Report by R. Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner of the Punjab to R. Temple, secretary to the Chief Commissioner for the Punjab, No.149, Lahore, 24 March 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol.VIII, Part-II, 199-200.

² Turab-ul-Hassan Sargana, *Punjab and The War of Independence 1857-1858: From Collaboration to Resistance* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.122.

³ From N.W. Elphinstone to G.W. Hamilton, 30 January 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 49.

Denzil Ibbetson wrote that, Ahmad Khan Kharral led the combined clans successfully in at least five battles and due to this his popularity spread far and wide and gave him great influence over the clans inhabiting areas near River Ravi. This was proved during Gugera Movement which according to Ibbetson, had been planned and organized by Ahmad Khan Kharral.⁴

Uprising at Gugera started on 16 September 1857. N.W. Elphinstone, officiating Deputy Commissioner Gugera sent L.P. Berkley with twenty horsemen to Jhamra to arrest Rai Ahmed Khan. As Ahmad Khan was not there, Berkley arrested 20 men and confiscated 700 cattle and burnt the village of Jhamra.⁵ Next day the British attacked Pindi Sheikh Musa but failed to arrest the freedom fighters and burnt the town.⁶

On 21 September 1857 British came to know about the presence of Rai Ahmed Khan and his companions at Gishkori, on the other side of River Ravi. British under Command of Berkley attacked the freedom fighters, a severe battle was fought. In this battle fourteen or fifteen horsemen of the British were killed but the loss of freedom-fighters was much greater as they lost their great leader Rai Ahmed Khan and his most trusted friend Rai Sarung of Begey Kay Kharrals. This was irreparable loss of the freedom movement. According to folklore Ahmed Khan was martyred while he was offering prayer. Dhara Singh identified him and Gulab Singh Bedi fired at him and martyred him.⁷

Luqman Joyia

Joyia clan played an important role during the war of independence 1857-1858. It would not be wrong if one says that the Joyias were the first who started the war of Independence in the Punjab. First of all, on 8 July 1857 Joyia clan of Lukhoke in Tehsil Pakpattan under the leadership of Luqman rose against the British and refused to pay revenue tax to the government and forced the government officials to run away. When Deputy Commissioner Gugera came to know about it, he sent a hundred men of the new police, along with thirty horsemen, under Captain Davies to Lukhoke. The *lumberdars* and many other prominent members of the Joyia family were arrested and sent to Gugera Jail, along with their

⁴ Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2001. First Published 1883), 175.

⁵ *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 45-47.

⁶ *Ibid*, 47.

⁷ A.D.Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi* (Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 1986), 137.

women and children.⁸ Some native accounts inform us that the Joyias had friendly relations with Rai Ahmad Khan Kharral. He met Deputy Commissioner Gugera in order to release Joyia prisoners and demanded their release. Consequently, some people were released from the Jail.⁹

After this the leaders of the clans started meetings at different places. One meeting was held at Lukhoke. After some days people of Joyia clan, under leadership of Luqman Mehruka Joyia.¹⁰ Killed Lieutenant Neville and some of his companions at the banks of River Sutlej. This enraged the British and they became revengeful. They attacked Lukhoke, Sahuka, Jamlera and Barra Bella and killed the people on large scale. They set on fire these villages as well as burnt their crops. Hundreds of people were hanged and big numbers of men were blown from cannons.

Rai Sarung Kharral Shaheed

He was the most trusted friend of Rai Ahmad Khan. He was born in 1805 A.D in a village near Syed wala. His father name was Rai Hamand. He became most prominent in the Begey Kay branch of the Kharral Clan.¹¹ He remained with Ahmad Khan from the beginning till end. He was also martyred on 21 September 1857 at Gishkori, fighting with the British under the command of Rai Ahmad Khan.¹² His descendants are now living at Jarranwala, Tehsil of district Faisalabad and many are living in districts Okara and Pakpattan.

Mehr Murad Fatiana Shaheed

Murad was son of Dalail, a Fatiana Chief of a village Jallhi Fatiana. Fatiana is a branch of Sial Rajput. Sials have almost more than hundred branches. Prominent among them are Fatiana, Tarhana, Hiraj, Bharwana and Sargana etc. He accompanied Rai Ahmad Khan in every event of the battle. When Rai Ahmad was martyred on 21 September, Murad pledged to take his revenge. So on the very next day he attacked the British alongwith many men of Fatiana, Kharral Quereshi, Wattoo Tarhana, Murdana, Vehnival and Bhadroo Clans and Killed Berkley and many others. Murad Fatiana struck the first fatal blow, more than fifty of

⁸ *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 43.

⁹ A.D. Ejaz, *op.cit.*, 54; *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 42-43.

¹⁰ In his name there is a village Mouza Luqman Mehruka, presently in tehsil Arifwala District Pakpattan.

¹¹ A.D. Ejaz, *op.cit.*, 32.

¹² *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 49.

Berkleys men were killed in this fight.¹³ Murad alongwith others were arrested and sent to Andaman Islands popularity known as 'Kala Pani'. Descendants of Murad Fatiana are found in Tehsil Tandlianwala district Faisalabad.

Mehr Bahawal Fatiana

He was elder brother of Murad Fatiana and a very prominent leader of Gugera Uprising. According to Cave-Browne he was the greatest man among them, the bravest and the most influential.¹⁴

He was one of those leaders of the movement who continued it for many months after martyrdom of Rai Ahmad Khan Kharral. His descendants are now settled in district Sahiwal.

Muhammad Kathia and Nathu Kathia

Kathia family of Harrappa played an important role in the War of 1857, especially the services of Muhammad Kathia and Nathu Kathia are unforgettable. Both were cousins and were born at a village Murad Kay Kathia, which is situated on the bank of river Ravi. Father of Muhammad was Jalla and Qasim was the father of Nathu. Both of them born in 1815 and were young at the time of War. In 1857 all branches of Kathia clan assembled under the leadership of Muhammad and Nathu, attacked Harrappa and occupied it. The British got it back after a great struggle of seven days. They wounded Captain Snow and besieged major Chamberlain at Chichawatni for four days.¹⁵

They encountered the British guns and canons with sticks, laces and axes. In November 1857 both of them surrendered. Muhammad died in the jail and Nathu managed to escape from the jail.¹⁶

Pir Nadir Shah Quershi

He was resident of Pindi Sheikh Musa now a town in the district Faisalabad. His forefathers came from Bahawalpur. He was born in 1818 at Pindi Sheikh Musa. His father's name was Pir Sultan Mehmud Quershi. He was close friend of Ahmad Khan Kharral, Murad Fatiana, Jalla Tarhana and Walidad Murdana. He supported and accompanied him in every event of battle. His village Pindi Sheikh Musa was centre of

resistance alongwith Jhamra. Due to his activities, his village was burnt twice by the British.¹⁷ Pir Nadir Shah Quershi was arrested in October 1857 and was also sent to Andaman Islands.

Walidad Murdana

Walidad Murdana, a great freedom-fighter of 1857, was born in 1825 at Muhammad Pur near Sahiwal. At the time of War his age was only 32. His father name was Naurang Khan Murdana. From the beginning he had friendship with Rai Ahmad Khan, Nadir Quershi and Murad Fatiana. When these freedom fighters rose against the British, Walidad also joined them. When the war started in 1857, Walidad destroyed the communication system of the British and the mail between Lahore and Multan remained suspended for two weeks. This enraged the British and they burnt the village of Walidad thrice. In the last when the war failed due to treacherous role of some collaborators and traitors, Walidad tried to hide himself but the traitors informed the British about him. He was arrested and sent to Andaman Islands alongwith many other freedom fighters. Walidad and some other freedom fighters jumped in the sea and after continuously swimming for several days he came back. Again British sent him to Andaman. Later the British informed about his death at the Islands.¹⁸

Bahlak Wattoo

Bahlak Wattoo was the chief of the Wattoo clan in 1857 and was the close friend of Rai Ahmad Khan Kharral. He was resident of Khadian Wattooan near Bahlak (a place named after him) a police station in tehsil Tandlianwala district Faisalabad. His brothers Ganda Khan, Jhanda Kha, Noor Khan and Rehm Khan also took part and fought bravely.¹⁹ After the British attack of 17 September 1857 on Jhamra, the residential town of Rai Ahmad Khan, many branches of the Kharral clan couldn't continue to stand with Ahmad Khan and returned to their homes as they saw the horrible designs of the British. At this time Rai Ahmad Khan contacted Bahlak Wattoo and he came with a big reinforcement and supported the freedom fighters to the last end. Bahlak had influence over the Wattoos of the both sides of the River Ravi. So on his call a large number of Wattoo people joined the war and sacrificed their lives

¹³ Ibid., 51.

¹⁴ Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1861), 214.

¹⁵ *Mutiny Report*, Vol. VII, part II, 212.

¹⁶ Mushtaq Adil, *Naqoosh-e-Sahiwal* (Sahiwal: Farogh-e-Zaban Publishers, 2020), 33.

¹⁷ *Mutiny Reports*, Vol, VIII, Part II, 47.

¹⁸ Mushtaq Adil, *Naqoosh-e-Sahiwal*, 31-32.

¹⁹ Zaheer Hassan Wattoo, *Athara Sow Satwanja Di Jang Wich Wattooan Da Hissa (Punjabi)* (Lahore: Sanjh, 2005), 91. *Mutiny Reports*, Vol, VIII, Part II, 45-47.

including Bahlak and many other prominent personalities of this clan. Bahlak and his tribesmen played important role along with Fatiana and Tarhana clans to take revenge of Rai Ahmad Khan.

Suja Bhadru

Suja Bhadru born at a village near Noor Shah in district Sahiwal. He had very cordial relations with the all neighboring tribes. He visited Satghara, Syed Wala, Jhamra, Murad Kay Kathia and all other centres of War and played an important role to bring all the tribes at one place and created a zeal among them. Suja participated in the war with his four brothers and played a vital role with Murad Fatiana in taking revenge of Rai Ahmed Khan. The British never succeeded to arrest Suja Bhadru.²⁰

Mokha Vehniwal

Vehniwal family also played an important role during the war at Gugera. Rajab and Mokha, two sons of Kohri Vehniwal fought bravely. Mokha accompanied Murad Fatiana, Jalla Tarhana and Walidad Murdrana and took revenge of Rai Ahmad Khan by Killing British officer Berkley at Kourey Shah. After this the British burnt many villages including the houses of vehniwals. Mokha with his many friends, was sent to Andaman. He with his some friends, jumped in the sea and came back and was never arrested again.²¹

Jalla Tarhana

He was son of Salabut Tarhana, who himself was a great freedom-fighter. Tarhana is also a branch of Sial Clan. Jalla and his father Salabat had friendship with Rai Ahmad Khan, Nadir Shah Qureshi and Walidad Murdana.²² Besides the Fatianas, Tarhanas were also very zealous to get the revenge of Rai Ahmed Khan and both the families played vital role in the battles of Kourey Shah and Jalhi. Tarhanas and Fatianas never reconciled with the British.²³

Kala Khan

Kala Khan or Kaley Khan was a freedom-fighter from Rawalpindi. There is no much information about him. Kaley Khan succeeded to reach Delhi and joined freedom-fighters there. He shot Nicholson when he was

²⁰ Mushtaq Adil, *Naqoosh-e-Sahiwal*, *op.cit.*, 34.

²¹ A.D. Ejaz, *op.cit.*, 40-41.

²² Turab-ul-Hassan Sargana, *Punjab and The War of Independence 1857-1858: From Collaboration to Resistance*, 124.

²³ A.D. Ejaz, *op.cit.*, 39-40.

attacking Delhi to reconquer it and Nicholson fell mortally wounded on the ground.²⁴

Sardar Baz Khan of Murree

Sardar Baz Khan was the leader of the Muree uprising. He was son of Fateh Noor Khan, a chief of the Dhund Abbasi Clan. According to author of 'Tareekh-e-Murree' the real name of Baz Khan was Sultan Ahmad Khan.²⁵ But like many other stories of this author this is also doubtful. Similarly story of kidnapping of Lady Lawrence by this author is most unlikely as this has not been corroborated by other accounts.

Dhunds came out to challenge the British under the leadership of Sardar Baz Khan. Sardar Baz Khan and his companions went from village to village to mobilise and organise people for their crusade against the British intruders. Sardar Baz Khan succeeded to get support of some important chief of clans of the area. Sardar Borha Khan of Satti clan and Sardar Hassan Ali Khan of Karral tribe are worth mentioning.

The main cause of uprising at Murree was religious. In the month of July 1857, the chiefs of the Dhund and Sati clans met Lieutenant Battye, Assistant Commissioner of Murree and protested on the ongoing missionary activities.²⁶ The freedom-fighters decided to attack but Hakim Khan, one of the *lumberdars* of Lora and a guard of Lady Lawrence, informed the British about the intention of the freedom fighters.²⁷ So, on September 2, the freedom-fighters attacked, the British were ready to respond. It was estimated that three hundred locals were involved in this attack. The total strength of the defenders was four hundred. As the freedom fighters were not expecting this resistance, so they were not ready for this and soon they went back. In the end British succeeded to crush the freedom-fighters. Sardar Baz Khan alongwith many other freedom-fighters i.e. Dr. Rasul Bakhsh, Dr Ameer Ali and a tin worker Syed Karam Ali were executed. In this way the movement at Murree came to an end.²⁸

²⁴ David Ross, *The Land of the Five Rivers and Sindh* (Lahore All-Biruni, 1976, 1st Published 1883), 174.

²⁵ Noor Elahi Abbasi, *Tarikh-e-Murree* (Muree: Noor Elahi Abbasi Memorial Library, 2005, 1st Published 1985), 93.

²⁶ *Mutiny Reports*, Vol, VIII, Part I, 329.

²⁷ Farrukh A. Khan, *Murree during the Raj* (Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2017), 337-338.

²⁸ *Mutiny Reports*, Vol, VIII, Part II, 329-332.

Moulana Abul Qadir Ludhianvi

Moulana Abul Qadir Ludhianvi and his family played vital role during the war of independence. He was a prominent member of Araeen²⁹ family of Ludhiana. Moulana with his elder brother and four sons, Moulvi Saif-ur-Rehman, Moulvi Muhammad, Moulvi Abdullah and Moulvi Abdul Aziz participated actively in the war. Due to leadership of Moulana Abdul Qadir and active participation of his family, Ludhiana became the center of the movement. Sunder Lal wrote,³⁰ Ludhiana city was the main center of the war of independence. There was zeal and enthusiasm everywhere. Jail was broken, British offices were burnt and the government treasury was occupied. After this, united force of Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Philaur left for Delhi to take part in the war.

According to V.D. Savarkar, 'There was a very influential moulvi in the city who always preached the people to get rid of the slavery of the British. The impact of the speeches of moulvi was that the city became strong center of the revolutionary parties and whole of the city rose up on his call. The revolutionary army of Jalandhar, Philaur and Ludhiana and a national army of people under leadership of moulvi left for Delhi'. Moulvi Abdul Qadir played important role and died in 1960.³¹

Conclusion

The heroes above mentioned are the unsung heroes of the war of 1857. 'Unsung' in a sense that they are not mentioned in our text books. More than 160 years have been passed and their struggle is not duly recognized. They are real heroes of the masses. They sacrificed their lives for their country and for the independence of their people. They have no personal grievance against the British. Their only aim was the independence of their motherland. Therefore, although their names are not found in our textbooks, but folklore and folk songs have kept them alive and people have a great love and respect for these heroes. They are considered as the symbol of resistance among the people of Punjab.

Lastly, it can be said that the role of the Punjabi masses who resisted the Raj has not been properly highlighted in the historiography

of the colonial Punjab. Therefore, there is a need to bring the role of the Punjabi masses to the forefront, in addition to the role of the elite, in order to assess the response and reaction to the British rule in the Punjab. I am of the opinion that the history of the war of independence of 1857-1858 in the Punjab cannot be genuinely assessed without investigation and analysis of the role of Punjabi masses and in addition to the official and non-official written records and reports, folklore and folk songs offer the best source in understanding aspirations of the people and the real story of the War.

²⁹ According to Mutiny Reports Moulvi Abdul Qadir belonged to Gujjar Family but it is not correct. He belonged to Araeen family. Among his descendants Moulvi Habib-ur-Rehman Ludhianvi of Ludhiana (India) and a prominent Pakistani politician Mr. M. Hamza M.A from Gojra (District Toba Tek Singh) are mentionable.

³⁰ Sunder Lal (Pandit), *Sun Satawan (Urdu)* (Aligarh: Anjuman Taraqi Urdu Hind, 1957), 55.

³¹ V.D. Savarkar, *The Indian war of independence 1857* (Bombay 2017, 1st Published in 1909), 55.