



The Wahabi Movement and the National Consciousness in Haryana

Karan Singh, PhD Scholar, Panjab University Chandigarh

Abstracts: *The region of Haryana played an important role in the great revolt of 1857, although the aim could be not be achieved. After the revolt, the country witnessed many socio-religious movements which aroused the national feelings among the countrymen. Among the various movements, the Wahabi Movement also played a significant role to exhort and arouse the feeling of nationalism in the masses. Although, it was blamed that the main aim and stream of the Wahabi Movement was religious yet it played an important role in arousing the national feeling in the masses.*

Key words: *Ambala, Haryana, Movement, Nationalism, Wahabi.*

Introduction:

The latter half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of national consciousness in India, as well as in the region of Haryana. Socio-cultural, historical, psychological and emotional unity amongst the people of a country is called 'nationalism'. Nationalism can be described as a characteristic that makes a group or community of people feel that they are integrated and united by common historical and traditional values and interests, and that they must politically organize in the form of the State. ¹ In the words of Haridass Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, "Nationalism is a devotion to one's nation. India with its mighty mountains, great rivers and vast plains was a continent rather than a country; divided into various provinces, inhabited by different people using diverse languages and sharing different cultures, it could boast of a single nation. Consequently that common conception of collective duties and responsibilities which emanates from a common nationalism was absent in India."² Historically, when one looks at the people of India, it is difficult to find a parallel to the type of

unity and common interest shown across the geographical expanse of India during the struggle against British colonial rule. This means that the people of India during the anti-colonial struggle showed a visible consciousness of unity and oneness in terms of their desire to be free from colonial rule and to establish their own political set up and constitution. What were the conditions that could have been prerequisites for the emergence of a national awakening? Was the emergence of a national awakening and national culture essentially dependent on some 'common framework of political identity and loyalty'? What are the conditions for the emergence of this common framework and the objective and subjective prerequisites.....for the emergence of a national culture?³

The outbreak of Swadeshi Movement in Bengal in 1905 challenged the British rule over India, in a modern ways. From the battle of Plassey (1757) to the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, the European powers were challenged by the Indians in many ways but they did not get success to overpower the Europeans and the revolt of 1857 may be called the last challenge of Indians to overthrow the



British till 1905 but in this challenge also Indians could not get success and the British superseded the Indians. It may rightly say that the feeling of nationalism among the Indians had been ripened upto 1905 and resulted in the 'Swadeshi Movement' in Bengal.

I

One of the movements which presented a serious threat to the British authority was the *Wahabi* Movement.⁴ It was one of the earliest, most consistent and protracted and the "most remarkably anti-British" movements which dominated the Indian history of the nineteenth century.⁵ The word '*Wahabi*' is a misnomer and it is generally regarded by a good number of Muslims as un-Islamic. This terminology was given by the British which suit in their ulterior motives as they did in later years in the case of terrorists. Generally, this term was used for the group of people who were strongly committed to liberate the land from the British yoke and to convert it into *darul-islam* from *darul-harb*. The term 'Hindustani fanatics', was also used for them in the Government records.⁶ Originally, it was started by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab (1707-1787) in Arabia.⁷ He was inspired by Imam Ibn Taimiya of the Hanbali, a school of Muslim Theology.⁸

The movement 'primarily a religious one' was also proletarian and ate oppressor, new *zamindars*, *mahajans*, and planters backed by the East India Company.¹⁵ Mir Nisarali belonged to Chandpur (Barasat), also led a socio-religious movement. His movement, mainly, took place amongst the poorer section of the peasantry in and around 24-*parganas* and Nadia.¹⁶ The movement was started as a socio-religious movement

revolutionary⁹ or puritan Islamic.¹⁰ In fact, it was a Muslim revivalist movement. In the beginning, the movement was started with its main object to abolish the tribalism in Arabia.¹¹ In India, the term *Mohomedia Tariqa* was used for them and it was the real name of Indian *Wahabis*. A *fakir* named Syed Ahmed (1786-1831) of Rae Bareilly; United Provinces was its founder.¹² Santimoy Ray described the *Wahabis* in the Indian context as "The Indian *Wahabis*, who were striving to reestablish the 'path of Mohamed' and '*farz*', 'command of *allah*', under the leadership of Syed Ahmed and Shariatulla were called as the founders of the sects *tariqa mohomedia* and *farazia*. From this they drew political conclusion that to convert this land as a *darul-islam* the rule of the *firingis* must come to end."¹³

Syed Ahmed made visits to a number of towns and cities to prepare for a holy crusade, which they called *Jehad*, against the domination of the foreigners. During his visits, all his activities were highly admired. Along with Syed's movement another movement, *farazia* under the leadership of Pir Sharitulla of Faridpur and the movement led by Mir Nisarali of Chandpur (Barasat) were also exhorting the Muslims.¹⁴ Pir Sharitulla drew the oppressed masses under his banner against the immedi

but very soon the logic of the movement threw him in the vortex of socio-economic struggle on the side of rural poor, both Hindus and Muslims.¹⁷ These three contemporaries- Syed Ahmed, Haji Shariatulla and Mir Nisarali met in Mecca while they were in *Haj*.¹⁸

Syed Ahmed tried to bring revival in Muslim community by means



of threefold activity, "the exhalation of the word of God, the revival of the spirit of faith in word and deed, and the practice of holy wars."¹⁹ Before starting the *Jehad* or Holy war, he made a journey to Mecca in 1822, returned in 1824 and founded "a system by which they (his followers) affected one of the greatest revivals known to Indian History, and which has kept alive the spirit of revolt against the British rule during fifty years."²⁰ Syed Ahmad designed himself *Imam Mahadi*, *Imam Humam*, *Amir-ul-Musliman* and *Khalifa*. He selected the North-West Frontier for their operations. There, he organised a strong group of fighters. ²¹ For military operations, volunteers were given military training. Along with these activities, he and his allies also helped the poor peasants. Socially and economically aids were also given to the poor people.²²

The *Wahabis* in India launched a movement for overthrow of the Sikh kingdom in the Punjab and the British from India. Syed Ahmed, the chief architect of the concept of freedom from British rule, launched a movement to fight against the Sikh kingdom in the Punjab. According to *Wahabis* under the leadership of Syed Ahmed, the Sikh rule was an oppressive rule on the Muslim peasantry. It was more so since this Sikh principality was safe under the umbrella of British power. ²³ He established himself in the Swat Valley where he operated a *Jehad* against the Sikhs. But in the pitched battle of Balakot in May 1831, he was killed in action and his army routed.²⁴ The sudden death of Syed did not subside the enthusiasm of the anti-British leaders of the *Wahabi* movement, although the movement had to suffer for some time. The loss of the great leader did not subside the

enthusiasm and took nearly decade to repair the damage and bring back the thread of freedom struggle again on the Indian scene.

In fact, Syed Ahmad had already created a well-knit organization from Dacca to Peshawar and established his centres in all the important towns of the country.²⁵ Patna became headquarter of their activities. ²⁶ The history of the Wahabi Movement, at least from 1831 to 1858, can be rightly said the history of the activities of Wilayet Ali and Enayet Ali of the Sadiquepur family of Patna. When they were in Lucknow for their education, they met Syed Ahmed and were greatly influenced by his philosophy. Afterwards they become his disciples and they were put in charge by Syed Ahmed with their headquarters at Patna. ²⁷ They were appointed as *Khalifa* a local chief. They in their turn had been authorized to appoint their own *Khalifas*. ²⁸ The main functions of *Khalifas* were to collect funds and to recruit the volunteers. Due to the untiring efforts of these *Khalifas*, active centers were established in Thanesar and Ambala.²⁹ Dudu Miah, the son of Mir Nisarali also led a very strong movement against the British. But, after years of jails, his health was deteriorated and he lost his life.³⁰

II

As far as concerned for the region of Haryana, Maulvi Muhammad Qasim of Panipat, Husaini and Muhammed Jaffar of Thanesar and Muhammed Shafi of Ambala, a contractor for the supply of need to Europeans in all the cantonments from Ambala to Naushera were some prominent and active leaders from this region.³¹ Muhammed Quasim had very close relations with Syed Ahmed. He also



worked with the tribal chief Syed Akbar Shah in Sithana, the headquarters of the North West Frontier. He made link with Maulvis Wilayet Ali, and Inayet Ali, the leaders of Patna centre and inspiring letters were also written for Patna centre mainly to Wilayet Ali.³²

In Haryana region, Muhammed Jafar alias Peeroo Khan can be described the nucleus of all the activities of the *Wahabi* movement. He was a great admirer and disciple of Wilayet Ali of Patna.³³ He was the incharge of the North-Western region of India. For the Haryana region, the British described Thanesar 'as one of the main depots' and Muhammed Jaffar 'as one of its chief organizers'.³⁴ Muhammed Jaffar was born in a poor family he worked as petition writer for some time. He became Lambardar of Thanesar in 1856. He helped the *Wahabis* in fighting the British authorities with his all means.³⁵

The death of Ranjit Singh and the first Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46) made the British paramount in the Punjab. This changed the character of the movement and the *Wahabis* soon assumed a political and military campaign against the British.³⁶ Wilayet Ali, who had become the unquestioned leader of the *Wahabis* with his headquarters at Patna, died in 1852. After his death, his brother Enayet Ali took full charge. In the North-West frontier, he was associated by Karamatali to invade British territory.³⁷

In 1857-58, he was actively waging war on the frontier but in Bihar his compatriots could not make much headway. Also, the younger leaders like Farhat Hussain decided to go underground and prepared to strike back during Ambala campaign in 1863 in the midst of the terrific repression let loose in

the wake of the defeat of the great uprising.³⁸ The *Wahabis* were one of the chief headaches of the British and the British also proposed the repressive policies and special operations were executed against them through the Special Police Department and by the armed expeditions on the Frontier.³⁹ Between 1850 and 1863 nearly twenty expeditions were sent in which 60,000 troops were sent against the *Wahabis*.⁴⁰ When the military operations failed, to crush the Wahabi Movement the campaign of police action, followed by judicial prosecutions was speeded up.⁴¹

The leaders of the *Wahabis* had to face state trials during the period of three years from 1863 to 1865 and all the prominent leaders of this 'seditious community' were arrested. In these judicial prosecutions, the state trial of Ambala 1864 and Patna 1865 were the main trials and were closely interlinked also. During these State-trials, state authority succeeded to locate many centres of the *Wahabis* which strongly working for the anti-British. Robert Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner of the Punjab, reported that the Muslims of Patna and Thanesar were in correspondence with the 64th Native Infantry near Peshawar and urged it to revolt.⁴² Haryana region was described a major centre of the activities of the *Wahabis*. Some of the disgruntled Muslim *zamindars* joined it. Thanesar, Ambala, Pehowa and Panipat were important centres in the Haryana region.⁴³

III

In 1863-64 the net-work of the organization was exposed due to one Ghuzzan Khan, a Pathan police Sergeant at *Chowki* Panipat, Karnal District.⁴⁴ Soon Muhammed Jaffar and others were



arrested. In the State-trial at Ambala before Sir Herbert Edward, the commissioner of Ambala, in 1864, the activities of the *Wahabis* came in to light.⁴⁵ The trial of Ambala sentenced to death Yahya Ali, Mohamed Jafar and Mohamed Shafi and the others to transportation for life. All the properties of the convicts were confiscated. Afterwards the High Court commuted the death sentence into transportation. In the Andamans, Farhat Hussain stood valiantly on the face of the barbarous torture and died the death of a martyr after few years.⁴⁶ About Ambala trials Santimoy Ray wrote-⁴⁷

“Ambala judgement throws some light on some of leaders of *Wahabi* revolutionaries. According to it Yahaya Ali ‘has been the mainspring of the great treason which this trial has laid bare. He has deluded hundreds and thousands of his countrymen into treason and rebellion. He has plunged the government of British India by his intrigues into a frontier war which has cost hundreds of lives. He is a highly educated man who can plead no excuse of ignorance. What he has done with forethought, resolution and bitter treason. Commenting on Jafar it said: ‘it is impossible to exceed the bitter hostility, treasonable and mischievous ability of this prisoner. He is an educated man and a ‘headman’ in his village. There is no doubt of his guilt and no palliation of it.’ Commenting on the character of the leading conspirators William Hunter paid grudging tribute to the earnestness and conscientiousness of Yahiya Ali and Jafar who made no pretention to loyalty and sought nothing at our hand.”

As earlier discussed, some of the leaders were condemned to long

sentences of imprisonment, others sent to Andaman Island. With the arrest of Muhammad Jafar, the movement virtually “met its doom” after 1864.⁴⁸ Though, after the battle of Ambala, most of the *Wahabis* led by Abdullah went over beyond the river Branduo. But they could form an anti- imperialist united front amongst various tribes. Intermittent conflicts, tensions and inability to forge a strong fight against the British brought the movement on the verge of a collapse.⁴⁹ It was completely suppressed in India by 1888.⁵⁰

Despite the fact that the movement did not get any substantial success however its consequences were effective. There is no doubt that it was the first premeditated and well planned revolutionary movement after the great revolt of 1857.⁵¹ Santimoy Ray wrote, “Commenting on the nature of the conspiracy as revealed in Ambala trial William Hunter referred to their admirable sagacity with which so widely spread a treason had been organized; the secrecy with which its complicated operations were conducted and the absolute fidelity to one another which its members maintained. Indeed the working of the scheme had been planned with great ingenuity; the genuine and bonafide work was so cunningly mixed with the antigovernment activity that it was very difficult for the authorities to determine the two. The fidelity of the great majority of the workers to the moment was also remarkable.”⁵²

Conclusion:

It was not appreciated by other than Muslim communities. They blamed that this was only for Muslims and focused on revival only of Muslim community. It also assumed that it also gave an impetus to widen the differences between the Hindus and the Muslims.⁵³



The movement was led by mostly the Muslims. There were two main aim reflected by the movement the revival of the Muslim community and for establishing the Muslim rule in India against the English. It is said that the movement was not be appreciated by the other communities. But according to Dr. Q. Ahmed: "it is evident that such a widespread movement could not have been sustained for long without the

active support of wider non-wahabi masses."⁵⁴ Secondly, the movement gave a turn to the politics which came to be dominated by religious dogmas.⁵⁵ It also kept alive the desire for freedom among the Muslims.⁵⁶ Whatever the nature and character of the movement, but it aroused the feeling of nationalism among the Indians especially in the region of Haryana because Ambala and Thanesar were its main centres.

References:

¹ Hoveyda Abbas, Ranjay Kumar and Mohammed Aftab Alam, *Indian Government and Politics*, Dorsin Kinderley, New Delhi, 2011, p. 26.

² Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *The growth of Nationalism in India (1857-1905)*, Presidency Library, Calcutta, 1957, p. (v).

³ Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 1979, p. 12.

⁴ Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, Publications Division Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, 1967, p. 23.

⁵ Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2011, p. 4.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 4-5.

⁷ R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. I, Firma Publishers, Calcutta, 1971, p. 117.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ J. Allan, T. Wolseley Haig, H. H. Dodwell, *The Cambridge Shorter History of India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1934 (Reprint, S. Chand & Co., New Delhi, 1969), p. 717.

¹⁰ J.C. Powell and Price, *A History of India*, Thomas Nelson, New York, 1958, p. 545.

¹¹ W.W. Hunter, *The Indian Mussalmans*, Trubner and Company, London, 1876, p. 61.

¹² Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 5.

¹³ Quoted from, *ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.



¹⁶ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁹ Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, p. 23.

²⁰ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, Atlantic Publishers, New Delhi, 1986, p. 63.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 11.

²⁴ Ibid; V.A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985, p. 802.

²⁵ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, p. 63.

²⁶ Briton Martin, *New India 1885*, Oxford University Press, Bombay, 1970, p. 160. "In 1843, when Dudu Miah was actively moving in eastern Bengal to organize his peasant army, Patna became the headquarter of a vast conspiracy with its links through India upto Sitana camp at the far end of North-West Frontier region." For detail see, Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, pp. 11-13.

²⁷ Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 12.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

³⁰ "In 1840, Dudu Miah made a determined bid to fight the oppressive *zamindars*, mostly Hindus and few Muslims-The *zamindars*, indigo planters and the British Government made a common cause against him. From the police source it is gathered that the number of supporters of Dudu Miah was nearly 80,000. His *khalifas* looked after the organizations, mostly in the districts Barasat, Jessore, Pabna, Maldah and Dacca. Besides, another important feature to note is that *farazias* were opposed by the wealthy Muslims and ignored by the urban Muslim aristocracy. By and large it had been accepted as fighting creed of the poorer section of the Muslim peasantry and artisans who were of course dominated by the Hindu *zamindars*. In 1847 he led an armed battle against the combination of indigo planters and *zamindars*. He was arrested and tried but was acquitted due to lack of evidence. But due to his tremendous popularity and wide influence he was finally put to confinement in the Alipore jail as a state prisoner when northern India was convulsed in the great uprising in. After the suppression of uprising he was released in 1859. But again he was arrested as soon as he returned to his native village. After years of jail his health was



shattered. He died as an uncompromising champion of the poor and oppressed *kisans* of Bengal leaving a revolutionary legacy to the future fighters for freedom, democracy and socialism.” For detail see, Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, pp. 9-11.

³¹ Syed Muhammad Latif, *History of the Punjab, from the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Time*, Eurasia Publication House, New Delhi, 1964, p. 586.

³² Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, p. 27.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, p. 64.

³⁵ V.N. Datta and H.A. Phadke, *History of Kurukshetra*, Kurukshetra, 1979, p. 215.

³⁶ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, p. 63.

³⁷ Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 14.

³⁸ Ibid, p. 15.

³⁹ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, p. 63.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, p. 64.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Q. Ahmad, *The Wahabi Movement in India*, Firma K.L. Mokhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1966, p. 233.

⁴⁵ Syed Muhammad Latif, *History of the Punjab, from the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Time*, p. 587.

⁴⁶ Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Quoted from, *ibid*.

⁴⁸ B.K. Muztar, *Kurukshetra: Political and Cultural History*, B.R. Publishers, New Delhi.1978, p. 97.

⁴⁹ Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, p. 64.

⁵¹ R.C. Majumdar, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. I, pp. 251-52.

⁵² Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 17.

⁵³ Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Q. Ahmad, *The Wahabi Movement in India*, p. 235. The participation of Hindu bankers and Brahmin pundits as contactmen to army in some cantonments is a pointer to this question to



transmit funds to North-West Frontier. The letter addressed to Hindu Rao, the brother-in-law of Daulat Rao of Sindhia, by Syed Ahmed seeking his support against the common *jihad* to end British rule also proves beyond doubt that the pioneers had to make a common cause under the stress of political and military necessity. See, Santimoy Ray, *Freedom Movement and Indian Muslims*, p. 19.

⁵⁵ S.C. Mittal, *Haryana: A Historical Perspective*, p. 65.

⁵⁶ Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, Vol. II, p. 30.