

The Role of NWFP in the War of Independence

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The shabby traders of East India Company who had landed on the shores of the Indian sub-continent in the seventeenth century became the supreme power by the end of eighteenth century. The battlefield of Plassy proved to be the start of the deluge. The Indian rulers failed to obstruct the rising power of the traders turned rulers. The repressive policies and the neglect towards the local socio-political scene by the company were bound to cause the feelings of antipathy. By the second decade of nineteenth century the signs of abhorrence were becoming visible. There were occasional revolts and uprising against the company's bigoted rule but the War of Independence of 1857 was the first organized effort to get rid of the shackles of British colonialist.

The 1857 war of Independence occupies a decisive place in the history of Indo-Pak sub-continent. This mega occurrence brought drastic changes in the sub-continent as it abolished the rule of East India Company, which was many years old. It was a highly complex event and even today many aspects of this phenomenal event defy comprehension. It affected every class and section of the Indian society. It was a traumatic event in the history of British rule in India. Even today it is difficult enough to describe it as a war of independence, revolution, religious war or a mutiny. Any event in the Indian history is hard to judge because of the presence of various aspects like diversity of race, religion, castes etc. The Indo-Pak subcontinent has the unique distinction of being invaded, colonized and ruled by a multiple number of actors motivated by racial and religious reasons in general and economic or

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commercial reasons in particular. The nature of this war has been variously commented upon. One view is thus held by persons such as V.D. Savarker, according to him it was an organized national movement. Its “great principles,” writes Savarker, “were *swadharma* and *swaraj*.”¹ Ashoka Mehta asserts that although the sepoys were the backbone of the mutiny, yet it would be wrong to call it essentially a sepoy’s mutiny. The number of civilian killed was as large as that of the sepoys.² The uprising of 1857 was termed as the Indian Mutiny by the British while the War of Independence by the Indians.

The War of Independence was considered by the British historians as essentially regional in character. They viewed that it was limited to the provinces of Utter Pardesh and west Bihar and certain states in central India. According to them, sporadic outbreaks occurred in Bengal, Rajistan, Punjab and Deccan but these were immediately put down and the areas remained firmly under the control of the British. They ignored the vast scale of civil disobedience; minimize the heroic resistance of the natives and present exaggerated account of the chivalry of the British Army. This historic occurrence was dealt with as an event of British history and relied mainly on the official narratives, government papers and reports and such diaries, letters and memoirs which were written by Englishmen who either actively participated in the army operation or happened to be in India at the time of the outbreak. As the source material of the British historians was superficial, inadequate, and essentially partisan in nature, their conclusion lacked historical accuracy and objectivity. In the course of time these histories have attained the colour of true history. Constant repetition of the biased versions helped transform this great patriotic war of independence into Indian Mutiny.³

The role of the North Western regions of India in the War of 1857 has been so minimized by the British that it has led to the popular impression that Punjab remained loyal to the British during the uprising. The reason for this impression is the campaign for the recapture of Delhi, which was one of the immediate and major military aims and was conducted from the Punjab by Sir John Lawrence. The alliance of the princes of the Punjab States and some of the feudalistic element with the British in India also

subscribed to this impression. But these views and impression pale into insignificance before the widespread disturbances all over the Northern and North Western regions of India. The civil disobedience and uprising did not only occur in the important towns or strategic places. Even small remote towns like Khangarh, D.G. Khan, D.I. Khan, Kohat, Hazara, Hoti Mardan, Peshawar and Murree did not lag behind in the war of independence.

As the war of 1857 broke out and the news of the outbreak at Mureet reached to the regions of the present day North West Frontier Province, all the Native Regiments except 21 Native Infantry and 18 Irregular Cavalry were disarmed. In the spring of 1857, the 55th and 64th Bengal Native Infantry of the East India Company were on the Frontier in addition to the under-strength Punjab Frontier Force. After the first word of the rising at Meerut in May came to Peshawar, British officers began to censor the sepoys mail. They discovered that many of the sepoys were in correspondence with Sayyid Ahmad followers in Swat and Sittana and that these in turn were in touch with the rebels in the Bengal presidency. The corps of guides was sent south immediately to join the remnants of the British forces. The Bengal Native Infantry was marched out to the edge of the tribal area as if an attack were expected from that quarter. Edwards and Nicholson attempted to raise new levies among the Pakhtuns to replace the troops being sent south. The tribes showed themselves reluctant to enlist, however, and the government in Calcutta expressed alarm at the raising of more native forces, and so the effort was abandoned. After a few weeks of tension, the garrisons at Nowshera and Mardan mutinied. Their behavior was tame compared to what was happening in other parts of India. They simply refused to obey orders. The Nowshera troops were induced to march into Peshawar where they were disarmed without violence.⁴ Immediately after the disarming at Peshawar the retribution was overtaking the 55th Regiment at Mardan. A small expedition of three hundred European Infantry, two hundred and fifty Native Irregular Cavalry and eight guns, six of which were howitzers proceeded on one long march to the Fort of Mardan in order to disarm the 55th Native Infantry which was more active than all in respect of mutiny.⁵ It was disarmed against the wishes of their British colonel. They

thereupon deserted, and the colonel blew out his brains in despair over the affair. The 39 Native Infantry when seemed to be in the form of revolt, it was also successfully disarmed at Dera Ismail Khan and Mainwali.

The regular Hindustani Regiments at Peshawar consisted of the 5th Cavalry and the 21st 24th 27th and 51st Infantry Regiments were in a state of revolt. On 21st May, Colonel Edwards returned to Peshawar. His colleagues Cotton and Nicholson had no cheerful intelligence to offer him. A great cloud was over the place. The sepoy regiments had shown unmistakable sign of that feverishness which presages revolt. Cotton had divided his Hindustani troops in such a manner as to render joint action more difficult and he had placed Europeans with guns in their immediate vicinity, to be prepared for sudden rising.⁶

In Hazara district, two of the deserting sepoys were captured a few days after the disarming of 55th Native Infantry. They were blown from the mouths of guns before a large assembly, which had been convoked for the purpose of being impressed by the executions. This sort of punishment was an instrument in the hand of the British through which the rest of the sepoys and the general masses could easily be warned. The main body of the 55th Native Infantry, about six hundred sepoys in all, fled together into Swat.⁷ The British while constantly watching the ominous symptoms upon the Frontier. Nicholson since his great raid against the fugitives of the 55th Regiment which had been still in the field, and he had frequently written to Edwards that the Musalmans chiefs on the border were eagerly watching the situation and encouraging the rebellions of our soldiery. There was a notorious outlaw, named Ajun Khan, who was believed to be intriguing with our troops at Abazai, a fortress on the bank of Swat River and Nicholson was eager to make a swoop upon him.⁸ The British succeeded in getting the local tribes to expel the rebels and unable to return to the plains, the desperate sepoys set out to march across the mountains to Kashmir where they hoped to be given refuge by the Maharaja of Kashmir State.⁹ They managed to cross the Indus and pushed on eastward under constant harassment by the tribes. In early July they had gotten as far as the Kaghan Valley, their number having been reduced from about six hundred

to less than two hundred by the rough terrain and hostile tribesmen. Ultimately they surrendered to the British. After the complete control over them, the British ordered to execute almost all of them. They were executed in carefully staged ceremonies throughout Hazara district. The grave of some may be seen even today in Abbotabad.¹⁰ In the summer of 1857, the British turned their attention to crush the remaining pockets of resistance in Yusufzai territory. They had a two-pronged approach; first to take control of the mountain strongholds of the tribesmen, and second to punish the Swat and Buner populace for providing sanctuary to the rebels. This appears to have been the sum total of blood shed in the North West Frontier Province during the war of independence.

Although the British at any cost suppressed the revolt of the sepoys throughout the areas of the North West Frontier Province yet still they were surrounded by powerful foes, any one of who could have struck successfully if one had chosen to do so. There was little doubt that in combination, the border tribes, Syed Ahmad's followers and the Afghan could easily have driven the British back across the Indus. This in turn would in all likelihood have inspired the Punjab to revolt. Sir John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of the Punjab, was conscious of such possibilities, therefore, he suggested early in June that the British should evacuate the Frontier, including the *Derajat*, invite Dost Muhammad Khan¹¹, to reoccupy his former territories as a reward for his loyalty. But this proposal was strongly opposed by Hugh James, one of the pioneers on the Frontier, who was now the secretary of Sir Lawrence and also by Edwards and Nicholson. Lawrence agreed to refer the matter to Calcutta for decision. The matter was ultimately resolved by the then Governor General, Lord Canning who ordered that the British should not evacuate the borders and hold on to Peshawar to the last.¹² The end of the war and the assumption of responsibility for the government of India by the British Crown brought visible changes to the Frontier. Its importance had always been strategic rather than economic and the East India Company had taken little notice of the lands beyond the Indus.

British official of the time and later historians unanimously ascribe the British success in holding the Frontier during the war to

the calmness and daring displayed at the time, which intimidated the local people and impressed them with the indestructibility of the British *Raj*. Indeed Edwards and his colleagues did act with great courage and skill, and they deserve no little credit for maintaining peace at a critical time. Probably the determining factor, however, was the fact that the Punjab remained to an extent loyal to the British. Had the warrior Sikhs and Muslims there risen against the British, the war would almost certainly spread throughout all the regions of the North West Frontier Province successfully. Formidable and widespread though the revolt was, yet it was to a great extent localized and poorly organized. To all appearance the nationwide uprising was a dismal failure, bringing misery to the subcontinent and in particular to the leaders of the movement and its participants. In reality, however the struggle had far reaching results. It led to the complete administrative overhaul, a reorientation of the British policy in religious and other matters and development in the political field, which were to pave the way for the later political struggle and final independence. The control of sub-continent was transferred from the East India Company to the British Government, which then for the first time took responsibility for the administration of the sub-continent. The old expansionist policy at the expense of the native administered territory was totally abandoned. Although the native soldiers and people of the sub-continent could not succeed in their great struggle for independence at that time yet their struggle was not mere a tiny event and it ultimately led to the complete transfer of power to India and Pakistan in 1947.

Notes and References

1. O.M. Parkash, *Mutiny and Its Aftermath* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2004), p.333.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Mutiny Reports from Punjab and NWFP*, Volume Two,(Lahore: Al-Biruni, n.d),p.i

4. James.W. Spain, *The Pathan Borderland*,(The Hume: Mouton and Co, 1963), p.110.
5. John Kaye, *The History of Indian Mutiny* (Lahore: Oriental Publisher, 1976), p.363.
6. *Ibid.*, p.357.
7. James.W. Spain, *op.cit.*, p.110.
8. John Kay, *op.cit.*, p.372.
9. James.W. Spain, *op.cit.*, p.110.
10. *Ibid.*, pp.110-111.
11. He was the founder of Pakhtun Barakzai dynasty in Afghanistan. Dost Muhammad Kkan (1793-1863) the twentieth son of the Chief of the Barakzai clan, spent his early years with his mother's relatives. He demonstrated his military skills by capturing the Afghanistan cities such as Kabul, Ghazna and Jalalabad.
12. James.W. Spain, *op.cit.*, p.111.