

Critical Study of the Role and Contribution of Devi Singh in the Mathura Region in the Freedom Struggle of 1857

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Introduction

The revolt which began in Meerut on 10th May 1857, spread like wildfire. Within a week of the breaking out of the rebellion, the English empire in Upper India had all but disappeared. Between the frontiers of Bengal and Punjab, English authority was acknowledged only for a few miles around Agra, and in some other isolated spots where there happened to be English regiments. To live in India now', wrote Thomas Lowe, was like standing on verge of a volcanic crater, the sides of which were fast crumbling away from our feet, while the boiling lava was ready to erupt and consume us." Every plowshare in Upper India was being turned into a sword or spear. After the outbreak at Meerut, the rebels rushed to Delhi, the age-old capital of India. In the way, villagers welcomed them even in the dark night with food and sharbat. Some of them accompanied them with their weapons-swords, spears, balkati, agendas (appliances for cutting sugarcane), or even lathi (staff). They entered Delhi through Delhi Gate, without any serious opposition, massacred every Christian they could find in the city, besieged the last Mughal Bahadur Shah 'Zafar', declared him to be their leader, and proclaimed him the Shahenshah-e-Hindustan.

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The rebel soldiers immediately found a response in the civil population. The areas where the Sepoys were recruited from, or their community people lived were immediately convulsed by a widespread sense of sympathy for the rebels, and other classes also revolted. Generally, the revolt of the Sepoys was followed or accompanied by a rebellion in the city and the countryside. Wherever the revolt broke out, the government treasury was plundered, the magazine was sacked, barracks and court-houses were burnt and prison gates were flung open. The rebels everywhere displayed towards the government records the same! animosity,” wrote Thornhill, ‘as they did to the account books of the Baniyas and for a similar reason. They regarded them as machinery by which we (the British) enforced our severe taxation and maintained that disciplined order which had become so distasteful to them.”

J. W. Kaye, the chief historian of the Mutiny, was in no doubt that the explosion came from deep within the depths of civil society and that British policy had steadily alienated the aristocracy and the priesthood while failing to reconcile the peasant proprietary classes. He admits that in the areas between the rivers Ganges and Jamuna “there was scarcely a man of either faith who was not arrayed against us.

The nature of the 1857 uprising aroused fierce controversy from the outset. In fact, the way in which the events of 1857-58 get interpreted depends on the ideology, politics and immediate intentions of person or community doing the interpretation. For the British, and much of the Euro-American community during the nineteenth century and later, it was a ‘Mutiny’. The official British explanation was that the Bengal Native Army alone had mutinied and any civil disturbances were the natural by-products of the breakdown of law and order. British civilian officials at once indicted the army authorities

for the long-standing laxity, indiscipline, and inefficiency that had at length made every regiment of the Bengal army mutinous or untrustworthy. They shut from their minds the possibility that in the model Civil administration of the North-Western Provinces any deep-seated discontent could have been at work. The character of the affair is that of a Military Mutiny- a struggle between the Government and I soldiers, not between the Government and the people.!!

But was it a Mutiny or National Revolt, this controversy was first raised inside the British ruling class itself? The defenders of East India Company underplayed the significance of the Indian revolt by characterizing it as a mere sepoy mutiny to hide the weaknesses of the Company rule. The opponents of the East India Company, the representatives of the British industrial bourgeoisie showed up the inadequacy of the above characterization and argued that it was a national rebellion. The conclusion they drew was that the Company's rule should be ended and the Crown take over India.”

People of different communities and castes participated in the first freedom struggle. Various leaders of the Jat community residing in western Uttar Pradesh also made their invaluable contributions to this struggle. Devi Singh of the Mathura region was also one of these leaders.

Activities of Devi Singh in 1857 Revolt -

Famous with the title of Sadhu Raja among the peasants of Mathura, Devi Singh was a rebel leader of Tappa Raya in the Mathura district. Strange enough, this Jat leader had in his biographer his principal enemy, Mark Thornhill, Magistrate of Mathura, who wrote the biography of this enlightened rebel', for future generations 'as illustrative of native habits and of the condition of the country at that time.¹ But the political implication of rural rebellion was not altogether lost on even

such a biographer. Day by Singh's career was brief and in its incidents, rather ludicrous,' wrote Thornhill, it might have been otherwise. With as small beginnings Indian dynasties have been founded. He was the master of fourteen villages. Runjeet Singh commenced his conquests as lord of no more than twenty-five."² But it would be possible. if he had got time to manage it.

Devi Singh was born on 11 January 1798. His father Purshottam Singh, an ordinary cultivator of village Acharya was a vigilant man, so he sent Devi Singh to Padhaji (Pathshala of a paid teacher) at Raya, where he was taught Mundi-Hindi, Sanskrit, and Arithmetic. According to the fashion of time students at Pathshala were taught wrestling, fencing, archery, and horse-riding. Devi Singh got perfection in all these arts.³ During his adolescence he came in contact with one Bairagi of Nimbarkpersuation, who enjoyed a considerable reputation as a Pandit. It was due to his influence that Devi Singh thought to renounce the world and became a Sanyasi at the age of twenty. But he disliked the way of Sadhus lived by begging, so to satisfy his wants for food he used to cultivate the soil and whatever he saved, he spent on needy people. Sadhu Devi Singh's fame spread over the area and he used to exhort people in his fields where he lived in a thatch. Soon he became highly respected among the GodhaJats of Tappa Raya.⁴

The most visible symbol of Jat authority in Tappa Raya was an old mud fort built by Jamshed Beg and renovated by Thakur Daya Ram, the Jatzamindar of Hathras in the early nineteenth century. The latter's control over this area ended with his subjugation by the English in 1817. But his family continued to be dominant magnates in this area and the loyalty of Gobind Singh, in 1857, helped the house to recover much of its old position.⁵ During the Mutiny Tappa Raya had a police station and tahsil. But more. important than that, it was dominated by

the Baniyas. Janaki Prasad, Jamuna Prasad, MatiLal and Kishan Das were leading mahajans who lived at Raya. It was their masonry houses that were the most conspicuous buildings in that place, and a large orchard of mango and Jaman trees, twenty-three bighas in extent, that adorned the tappa was planted by Srikishan Das Baniya, whose son, Jugalkishor had also one of the two indigo factories in the town, the other belonged to Mr. Saunders. Gokul Das Seth, who headed the list of prominent Mahajan made on the eve of the Mutiny, lived in Raya, as did Nand Ram, head of the rising Baniya family of the region.⁶

The region around Raya was not as fertile as that of Baraut. The soil varied in quality and irrigation was carried on from wells rather than from canals. The Jats were the largest group in a population devoted exclusively to agriculture. In Mahabanpargana, which included Tappa Raya and its villages, the Jats cultivated 22 percent of sir lands and 35 percent of the area as occupant ryots and tenant-at-will. From the malikJats to the tenant Jats they cultivated 58 percent of the entire area between themselves. Each clan had settled in a compact area: the Rawat had their holdings in Sonkh, the Duser in Sonai, and the Godha in Raya.”⁷

The land tenure was a bhaiachara in perfection, but due to family divisions of land, the pattidars were differentiated in terms of ownership. Some could own more than 500 bighas of land whereas others did not more than sixty. The inflexibility of the settlement operations was compounded by the heavy revenue demand. his report on the settlement in the Tappa Raya Deede referred to the over-assessment and the resultant mortgages by which the government demand was provided for.⁸ Arriving upon the scene on the eve of the Mutiny, Thornhill was impressed by the consensus that was then ‘among the natives.... both respectable and lower orders’ to the effect that the settlement of this district [was] severe.⁹

The incidents about the atrocities of mahajans and British revenue officials, told by the GodhaJats moved Devi Singh, but he used to preach them patience. However, he was getting news that the rebellion had spread throughout the district. The Jats of Mat attacked Dildar Ali Khan, a zamindar, and killed him. The Commissioner called the Bharatpur troops to help the British administration to curb the rebels, and they were stationed at Kosi. Now it became difficult for Devi Singh to sit silent. The ChaudahTaraf called a large meeting to rise against the foreign rule and invited Devi Singh there. The Bhagwa robe-wearing ascetic put sword in one hand and matchlock in another and behind him stood Godha and PachahraJats of 60 villages with spear, sword, pike, ax, lance, mace, balkati(sugarcane cutter), spade, and lathi. He sent his friend Shri Ram to Raghunath Singh, the commander of Bharatpur troop stationed at Kosi, and asked him not to stand against his own brethren.”¹⁰

The uprising of Devi Singh, it has been stated, began with the attack on the township by the zamindars, the cultivators, and the residents of the ChaudahTaraf. i.e..the core villages surrounding Raya. The zamindars of AcharuLaru are named Dhani Ram and Sesh Ram (Sri Ram), Hulasi, Sawee and Akbar of Saras, and Chain Sukh, the Jatlumbardar of Tiwa, Amar Singh of Hansi, Gobind Singh of Malhai, Nand Ram of Narwa and hundreds of GodhaJats attacked the Neel-Kothi. The ‘thannah of Rayah had been burnt down and the record destroyed by the villagers. All the zamindars of ChaudahTaraf Raya with a party of 1000 men, under Devi Singh, plundered the carts laden with salt and gram belonging to MuqimParao and also the suppliers of the Cantonment. By the evening they reached Mathura.¹¹ When Thornhill learned about the uprising of Devi Singh, he fled. Devi Singh and his men pursued him uptoBharatpur border.

Coming back they let loose all the prisoners confined within the jail. When Devi Singh returned Raya after driving Thornhill, the people of ChaudahTaraf welcomed him and made him their Raja.¹¹

The role of the ChaudahTaraf on this occasion was particularly significant. The fourteen villages had in times gone by formed a single estate,' wrote Thornhill, ... During the half-century of British rule they had been sold and resold, and the proprietors reduced to the condition of mere cultivators. But they still held the tradition of their former supremacy and looked forward to the time when they might recover it. On the breaking out of the mutiny, that time seemed to them to have arrived, and they hastened to avail themselves of it. In each village they rose and turned on the new owners; of these most fled, the rest fought. In these fights, Dayby Singh came to the front..... Eventually, Dayby Singh's fellow caste-men obtained the victory, re-established themselves in their ancient position, and this done, Dayby Singh elected himself as their Rajah.¹²

Due to his saintly habits, Devi Singh's influence spread from Karab to Mat and from Sonai to Mathura. According to Thornhill, Devi Singh would come to the town at dawn every day, take his seat at his headquarters in the schoolhouse, receive petitions, hear complaints and dictate dispatches. This done, he devoted the rest of his day to plundering the Bunniahs, which he did very deliberately, all the town assisting'. Settling accounts with the moneylenders was perhaps the most distinctive feature of this insurrection. Indeed this turned out to be the primary expression of the new regime's coercive powers-its power to judge and punish. Every morning a Baniya would be brought to trial before the Raja, cross-examined, entreated to declare his hoardings, and surrender bonds and mortgage deeds. He would be let off if his response was found satisfactory. Otherwise, he

would be put to the torture, but apparently without any excessive severity, for Thornhill testifies to having ‘found no case where any Bunniah had been serious. hurt.’¹³

‘It was not corporal punishment but pillage that was used by Devi Singh to reduce the moneylenders of Raya, their shops, as well as houses, were subjected to this particular form of violence.¹⁴ Every shop was completely plundered and not plundered but wrecked. Whatever was worth carrying off had gone to the villages, the rest lay in the street. The roadway was covered with torn account-books, broken bottles, fragments of jars, and boxes, besides the debris of the floors and verandahs.’¹⁵ The dwelling houses fared even worse. In the search of hidden treasures, the smaller ones had been nearby pulled to pieces; all of them were more or less reduced to ruins. Such disciplinary proceedings would usually terminate in the release of an offending Baniyas, for ‘like a cobra deprived of its poison bag, without his documents he was considered harmless.’¹⁶

However, being a Sadhu, Devi Singh did not reckon with the strength of the British empire. To him, the colonial state was a local affair, and having driven out the police he thought he had overthrown our government. This want of maturity, perhaps historically inevitable, was soon to cost him his life and his little kingdom. For the audacity of the armed peasantry, roused en-masse to settle accounts with the Baniyas, the element of the local society still loyal to the Raj in 1857 and Devi Singh’s expressed intention to drive Thornhill, the District Magistrate out of his refuge in an opulent banker’s house in Mathura city, prompted the latter to make an example of Raya. Actually, on 29 May when the treasury guards mutinied and all the Europeans escaped and rode out, and Raghunath Singh refused to admit the Europeans into his camp, and further declined to give up the Seth’s guns, Thornhill and his clerk went

to Agra to get Commissioner's help and returned empty hands to Mathura, found the station burnt. The Jats of DeviSingh pursued them, so they took refuge in an opulent banker, Seth Lakshmi Chand's house, who received them most kindly. The rebels tried to capture them from the house but they remained hidden. The Jats besieged the house and dug a ditch around the house and filled it muddy with water. On the arrival of the Kotah contingent from Agra to free him from the state of virtual seizure, Thornhill led it into an attack on the rebel village where he seized Devi Singh and Shri Ram and hanged them with little ceremony behind the police station on 17 September 1857. That marked the end of the short-lived counter-Raj in Tappa Raya. With Devi Singh, Dhani Ram, Sesh Ram, Kanha Singh, and other Godha Jats were also hanged. The village of Acharya was ruined. 'Day by Day Singh's career was brief, and in its incidents rather ludicrous,' wrote Thornhill in concluding his reminiscences of the village Raja. This condescension followed to no mean extent from his discovery of the utter ordinariness of the adversary. He was a very ordinary-looking man, who, when captured by the counter-insurgency forces, was hardly distinguishable from the other peasants, the seat of his power was an ordinary village, large and very ugly, a mere collection of mud huts closely huddled together, the only document of state that fell into the hands of his captors was a letter from fellow-villagers that 'reported only the purchase of a few pennyworths of pepper and about an equal amount of sugar and vegetables'. But it is precisely in such ordinariness, scorned by the administrator turned historian, that the student of Indian history must learn to identify and acknowledge the hallmark of a popular rebel leadership—a leadership which, even it stands at the head of the masses in a struggle, bears on it all the marks of its emergence out of the ranks of the masses themselves.

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