

AWADH REBEL PROCLAMATIONS DURING 1857-58

Iqbal Husain*

During the progress of the Revolt of 1857 the rebels issued a number of Proclamations. Translations of some of these Proclamations are preserved in the National Archives, New Delhi and the State Archives at Lucknow and Bhopal. Some have survived in the original or have been published in part or full in Urdu.¹ Special mention may be made of the Proclamations issued by Nana Sahib, Nawab Banda, Khan Bahadur Khan of Bareilly, Feroz Shah (in the name of Bahadur Shah) and Begam Hazrat Mahal in the name of her minor son Birjis Qadr.² In this paper an attempt is made to examine the contents of the Proclamations issued by Birjis Qadr and Ahmadullah Shah from Awadh which reflects the ideological apparatus of the rebel in Awadh.

A cursory look at the Proclamations reveal that the rebels laid emphasis mainly on the following points: (a) Cruelty and misbehaviour of the *kafirs*, i.e. the *firangis* (English),³ (b) united defence of religions of the Hindus and Muslims;⁴ (c) Extirpation of British rule from India by all means;⁵ (d) Protection of the honour and property of the Indians;⁶ (e) Deceitful nature of the British; and (f) the better conduct of Indian rulers in comparison to the British. In one of the Proclamations issued by Birjis Qadr it is asserted: "All the Hindus and Muslims know that four things are extremely dear to every human being i.e. (a) *deen* and *dharam*, (b) honour and respect; (c) Life of his own and the family members; (d) Property and other belongings".⁷ Proclamations issued by the leaders from Delhi, Jhansi, Kanpur, Bareilly, Allahabad and Kanpur echo practically the same feelings against the British.⁸ Due to the similar themes of the contents of these Proclamations it would be not surprising if they are identified as a part of the general propaganda against the British. These reflected a long period of underlying resentment against the inequities of British rule, which went back to the criticisms voiced by a supporter of the British in the time of Warren Hastings.⁹

There is a frequent reference to the cruelty and oppressions of the *firangis* (also termed *kafirs*). English misconduct towards Indians was not devoid of racial prejudices, as admitted by Russel and others.¹⁰ The British even after committing brutalities like whipping and abusing Indians were not answerable. Despite after murdering Indians they

* AM-11856, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh

were set free.¹¹ These cruelties appeared to climax in the annexation of Awadh (1856). According to one estimate nearly 70,000 soldiers on the pay roll of Wajid Ali Shah lost their jobs after the annexation,¹² and handicraft industries were adversely affected due to the influx of the British manufactured goods.¹³ This in turn rendered a large number of weavers jobless and starving.¹⁴ Apart from the artisans and daily wage-earners, a number of families of the nobles also suffered. John Kaye wrote:

The condition of some of these people was truly pitiable. Men and women of high birth, tenderly reared and luxuriously surrounded, were suddenly cast adrift on the world, without the means of subsistence. Some are known to have gone forth into streets to beg under the cover of darkness at night.¹⁵

Sufferings of the high and low strata of society in Awadh naturally caused wide spread discontent. Rees, one of the British Officers, who took an active part in the siege of Lucknow during the rebellion of 1857-58, confesses:

We had done very little to deserve their love and much to merit their detestation. Thousands of nobles, gentlemen and officials who during the King's time had held lucrative appointments were now in penury and want, and their myriads of retainers and servants thrown out of employment.... were starving in our administration".¹⁶

In the Urdu pamphlet '*Risala Fath-i Islam*' the British cruelty against the people was described as shameful. They burnt houses, killed innocent people and children, hanged learned men and rich persons, used the poor people as human shelter in the battle fields, destroyed villages after villages and acted like 'Pharoahs'.¹⁷ The rebels believed that there should be no delay in the extirpation of the British from India "for if they survived, tomorrow they would kill all the men of this country and destroy our religion".¹⁸ Prince Feroze Shah in his Proclamation of 25 August, 1857 also takes up the cause of the *zamindars*: "... exorbitant *jama* disgraced and ruined several *zamindars*, by putting up their estates to public auction for arrears of rent..." He also speaks of the monopolization of trade of all the fine and valuable merchandise"; and "deprivation of Indians from higher Civil and Military service, low salaries to the sepoy as compared with the British or Europeans, destruction of artisans by introducing British imports, ruinations of religious classes specially the Pandits, Fakirs and other learned men". Hence the Prince's appeal to all to "extirpate the infidels".¹⁹

In almost all the Proclamations issued, the rebel leaders emphasised the protection of their religion, '*deen*' and '*dharam*', which was

in danger under the British rule.²⁰ Apprehension about the danger to the religions was not without foundation. Even the loyalists like Syed Ahmad Khan and the author of *Zafar Nama* endorsed it.²¹ Most of the Proclamations were addressed to the 'Hindus and Musalmans' calling upon them to unite for the protection of *dharam* and *deen*. The Bengal Army had a predominant upper caste recruits specially the Rajputs, Brahmans, Syeds, Shaikhs and Pathans,²² who were orthodox and religious. To ensure their loyalty the British employed Pandits and Maulvis who administered oaths to the recruits in the name of the God and/or or of religious scriptures like Quran. Yet, despite these safeguards, the Sepoys felt, especially after the incident of the greased cartridges that the British wished to destroy their faith.

It may be argued that the Proclamations' mode of addressing Hindus and Muslims is indicative of a distinct division between Hindus and Muslims. This theory was later on developed and much propagated under the official patronage in the post-1857 period. Yet it is remarkable that during the progress of the rebellion of 1857-58, the rebels had a clear vision about the unity of the two communities. The author of *Zafar Nama* refers to the rebels' slogans: " *deen to duee deen Hindu ka dharam Musalman ka iman*" (There are only two religions, the dharam of the Hindus and the *Iman* of the Muslim); *Ek pita ke duee putra. Ek Hindu ek Turk.* ('Born of one father one is Hindu and the other Muslims '*Inka choli daman ka sath*' (The (two) are inseparable).²³ Hence the Proclamations addressed themselves to "Oh! men of Hindustan".²⁴ "O Brethern", "Hindu and Musalman brothers",²⁵ meaning thereby that though they believed in two different faiths, they considered themselves brothers born of one father i.e. Adam or Musa. The religious unity among the Hindus and Muslims was built up consciously by the leaders of the rebellion. Cow slaughter was banned in Delhi and Bareilly through the issuance of repeated notifications.²⁶ The unity among the Hindus and Muslims during the rebellion of 1857 was so strong that even repeated attempts by the British to promote communal disharmony through bribery did not succeed in Rohilkhand and Delhi.²⁷

The uprising in 1857 was the consequence of popular disaffection. The discontent found an outlet in the war against the British. Interestingly, as observed by Chattopadhyaya, majority of the revolting sepoys were supplied by the Hindus but most of the leaders came from among the Muslims'.²⁸ This became possible due to the presence of a strong Wahabi network and access of the Maulvis to the British cantonments at Gorakhpur, Shahjahanpur, Bareilly, Alwar, etc.²⁹ It is significant that no where any dispute on the question of leadership

arose on religious ground, and the leadership was mostly in the hands of Muslims. Perhaps this situation was created by Sindhia, who assured the British that "Banaras, Gaya, and other centres of Hindu opinion, to which all had looked would abstain from issuing any religious pretext for the revolt".³⁰ It should also be noted that the main centres of rebellion were Awadh, Ruhelkhand and Delhi where a large number of *muafidars*, mostly Muslims and Hindus, who had to maintain *madrasas*, *khanqahs*, mosques, temples, *pathshalas*, sarais, etc. out of their *muafi* income, had been adversely affected under British rule.³¹ Further the land revenue in the North West Provinces was very high as compared with Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Ross Donnelly Mangles stated before William Ewart in March, 1859, that from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa which covered 1,26,133 sq. miles had 3.25 millions sterling returns as against North West Provinces covering 72-52 sq. miles yielded an annual return of 5 million sterling revenue.³² It adequately indicates how the North West Provinces was highly taxed which made the peasantry unhappy with the British rule. Combining with other classes they raised slogans 'Allah-o Akbar', 'deen deen' 'Jai Kali Ma ki', 'Ya Ali' and took up Mahabiri and Mohammadi flags.³³ The unity exhibited by the Hindus and Muslims during the rebellion alarmed the British diplomats. The literature created by them and historians in the post-1857 era thus emphasised that the rebellion of 1857 was a Muslim conspiracy.³⁴ The Imperial Government, as Ram Gopal observed, pursued a policy of 'hostility and distrust' towards the Muslims until 1871, when they reversed it under Mayo's directives. The British policy now centred round the creation of division between the Hindus and Muslims on religious grounds so as to keep their imperial interest intact. The unity of 1857-58 was thus consistently sought to be undermined by raising the level of differences between Islam, Christianity or Hinduism.³⁵

It is noteworthy that most of the Proclamations issued by the rebel leaders also speak of the extirpation of the British from India. Interestingly the Proclamations contain several words to identify the English or British such as 'engrez' 'nazaren', 'nasara', 'kafirs'. They are denounced as enemies of the life, property and religion of the Musalmans and, "Hindus who being puffed up with self conceit and pride, have thought to make the people of God converts to the Christianity".³⁶ Another Proclamation says:

"The English are the people who over-throw all religions. You should understand well, that with the object of destroying the religions of Hindustan, they have for a long time been causing books to be written and circulated throughout the country by the hands of their clergymen, and, exercising their authority, have brought out a number

of preachers to spread their own tenet

Consider, then, what systematic contrivances they adopted to destroy our religions".³⁷

Khan Bahadur Khan in this Proclamation thus counts the evil deeds of the British to destroy Indian religion by encouraging widow re-marriage, prohibiting the *Sati* and adoption, conversion of Indians through the supply of contaminated eatables like flour (*ata*), etc. The Proclamation appeals to Hindus and Muslims in these words: "All you Hindus are hereby solemnly adjured, by your faith in the Ganges, Tulsī and Saligram; and all you Musalmans, by your belief in God and Quran, as these English are the *Common* enemies of the both, that you unite in considering their slaughter extremely expedient...."³⁸

The Proclamations also underscored the complaint that the honour and property were not safe under the British rule.³⁹ There was constant warning for the people too about the 'deceitful nature' of the British. The replacement of the Company's government by the Queen's government in India was seen as another such deceitful action. The new government followed the same policy through the same Governor-General and the Judicial Administration.⁴⁰ The Proclamations compare the British rule with the rule of the Indian potentates, and claim that the rule of the latter was much better than the former.⁴¹

Lord Canning's Proclamation popularly known as the Awadh Proclamation of March, 1858, declaring just six⁴² loyal *talluqadars* to be sole hereditary proprietors of land which they possessed at the time of annexation in 1856. It also promised them further rewards⁴³ and declared that, with the exception of the six *talluqadars*, the proprietary rights in the soil of the provinces were confiscated by the British Government which would dispose of that right in such manner as might seem fitting.⁴⁴ The *talluqadars* were already licking their wounds after the Summary Settlements by the British Government after the annexation. According to an estimate they lost 9,900 villages out of 23,500 villages or approximately over 43% of their total possessions held in 1856.⁴⁵ Yet the Summary Settlement was incomplete. Meanwhile seizure of the *talluqadars* fortifications further antagonised them greatly and most of them began to feel insecure. Many of them, therefore responded to the call of the rebels in 1857.⁴⁶ Most of the British officers were surprised over such a large number of *talluqadars* participating against the Raj. They attributed the *talluqadars*' attitude towards the British as due to it having reduced "them to a level with the meanest before the law.... because it compelled them to disband their armies, pay their revenue regularly, and not oppress their ryots".⁴⁷

The Chief Commissioner of Awadh disagreeing with the Proclamation issued by Canning warned the Government of the *talluqadars*' 'desperate and prolonged resistance'.⁴⁸ He pleaded for the restoration to their ancient possessions. The Governor-General disagreed and stuck to his decision to inflict deterrent punishments on the rebel *talluqadars*.⁴⁹ The Home Government, however, agreed to the Chief Commissioner's proposals admitting that the hostilities in Awadh against the British were in the nature of a 'legitimate war than that of rebellion' and recommended clemency to the *talluqadars* as no Government could be maintained by force where the people were rendered hostile by a sense of wrong.⁵⁰

While the British Government still debated the issue, the latter everywhere took possession of the villages they held before the Summary Settlements. The village *zamindars* deserting the British joined hands with the *talluqadars* offering their allegiance."⁵¹ Many British Officers serving within the territories of Awadh began to be critical of the British measures. Raikes commented, "The fatal error of attempting to force the policy of Europe on the people of Asia ... must be corrected for the future, as it had been atoned in the past".⁵²

The rebels having tacit support from the *talluqadars* in Awadh offered stiff resistance to the British. The successes of Ahmadullah Shah, who kept the British at bay for about two years in Awadh, was a regular recipient of material and monetary supports from some of them.⁵³ Such a situation was not conducive to the interest of the British. Canning's subsequent Proclamation of March, 1858, which is considered a concession by a modern historian,⁵⁴ could not assuage the injured feelings of the *talluqadars*. General Outram who played the key role in the conquest of Lucknow predicted that Canning's policy could prolong the rebellion in Awadh.⁵⁵ Consequently, he initiated the policy promising to the *talluqadars* that "no land would be confiscated if they submitted, and the claims to land held before the annexation would be heard".⁵⁶ The policy of Outram was carried to success by Robert Montgomery, the new Chief Commissioner of Awadh, and Major R. Barrow. By June, 1858, Canning himself changed his stand on his Proclamation of March, 1858, giving new interpretations favourable to the *talluqadars*.⁵⁷ Canning's new policy was translated into reality from October, 1858, treating the loyal *talluqadars* with honours and issuing *sanads* to others.

The withdrawal of the *talluqadars*' support weakened the position of the rebels in Awadh. In the meantime Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1 November, 1858, with assurance of surrendering rebels of amnesty; promising to honour all agreements made with the previous