

A NOTE ON THE PROVISIONAL REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT OF ROHILKHAND 1857-58

M. S. Usmani

The provisional Government set up by the Revolutionaries at Bareilly on May 31, 1857 was truly a people's government. When the Indian troops stationed in Bareilly contonment broke out in open rebellion, the British Officers, both civil and military, left Bareilly and took refuge in Nainital. Thus a vacuum was created in the administration and Bareilly region was threatened with chaos and anarchy. In 1857 the population of Bareilly was approximately 112,000 and the city was full of criminals and bad characters. The leading citizens feared that the troops in conjunction with the bad elements of the city would plunder the city and, therefore, they took immediate steps to restore normalcy and establish a civil administration at Bareilly to carry on the work of government in as efficient a manner as the conditions prevailing at that time would allow. It is significant that within a few hours of the mutiny, a civil administration was set up in the city which shows that the citizens of Bareilly were quite prepared for the eventuality and had made adequate preparations to fill up the vacuum caused by the mass evacuation of the British Staff.

The citizens of Bareilly chose Khan Bahadur Khan, retired Sadr Amin under the British administration and a descendent of Hafiz Rahmat Khan, the last independent ruler of Rohil Khand, to head the Provisional government.

Khan Bahadur Khan was among the most highly respected noblemen of the city and enjoyed the confidence of the populace. It is significant that before the outbreak on May 31, 1857, Khan Bahadur Khan also enjoyed the confidence of the British officers who regularly received him and consulted him in all matters concerning the situation in the town.² In a popular British account of the mutiny, Khan Bahadur Khan is described as "an old, venerable looking man, with a soft, insinuating answer....."² He was cultured, courteous and polite and was free from religious or sectarian prejudices. He had a large

number of Hindus among his friends. He was a true patriot and loved his country and wanted to see it free and strong. He had no selfish ends and personal ambitions and did not stand on false prestige when national interests demanded a sacrifice on his part. No other head of government would have agreed to relinquish his powers and hand them over to another person as Khan Bahadur Khan did when Nana Saheb came to Bareilly in the course of his campaign against the British.⁴ He was, therefore, most eminently qualified to head the provisional government.

The democratic character of the Government :

The Administrative machinery set up at Bareilly in May-June 1857 was the region's first attempt at Democratic Government in miniature. For the first time, an attempt was made to include people's representatives in the policy making bodies of the Government, Khan Bahadur Khan came from a Royal family no doubt, and his family background had been feudal rather than democratic, but he considered himself the people's representative. He had no intention of setting himself up as an independent ruler. He looked at Rohilkhand as a part of India whose legitimate ruler in 1857 was Bahadur Shah Zafar. He, therefore, sent an application to the Emperor at Delhi, requesting him to appoint him the Nazim (Governor) of Katehr (Rohilkhand), Bahadur Shah granted his request and Khan Bahadur Khan was duly appointed Governor of Katehr through a royal firman.⁷ Thus, legally speaking, Khan Bahadur Khan was a subordinate officer of the Mughal Emperor and his representative in Rohilkhand, but for all practical purposes he was quite independent, as Bahadur Shah, being embroiled in his own difficulties at Delhi, could not send him directions regarding the affairs of Rohilkhand.

The Administrative Council.

Khan Bahadur Khan appointed an Administrative Council to advise him in the affairs of the Government, making in as broad based as possible. This Administrative Council was a policy making body confirmed appointment of key Officers and laid down the policies to be followed by the Government. It consisted of Shobha Ram (the Diwan, or chief Minister), Ahmad Shah Khan and Mubarak Shah who were the most influential men of Bareilly and had a great following and influence among the people. This administrative council remained in office throughout the period of the provisional government in Rohilkhand

(1857-58). There were separate committees for assessment of taxes, trial of cases etc. which included men from the class or community, which was most likely to be affected by the decisions of the Committees.

Civil and Revenue Administration.

Khan Bahadur Khan and his Supreme council had to work in difficult times and they had to devote all their time and energy to the campaign against the British. They, therefore, could not introduce any innovations in the civil and revenue administration. All that they could do was to restore the old administrative machinery of the East India Company which had broken down after the Revolt on May 21, 1857. The Revolutionary Government of Bareilly restored law and order in the cities and rural areas. The Government servants who had been working under the company's administration were asked to return to their work. Most of them resumed their duties and a few who did not were replaced by making new appointments. This goes to the credit of the Revolutionary Government that it performed its duties so well that even its worst enemies were compelled to praise it.

The Friend of India, which was not at all friendly to the rebels, was forced to admit that...⁶ "Khan Bahadur, almost the only man who during the rebellion rose from the people had established a quasi-regular government. The revenue was regularly collected, the cities were protected, and but for the incessant feuds between the Hindoos and Mussalmans the province would have presented the appearance of a Native State."

Khan Bahadur Khan protected the interests of the poor and small farmers and tenants and enjoyed their support and loyalty. The British agents tried their best to rouse the Hindu majority in the rural areas against Khan Bahadur Khan but they failed in their efforts miserably. The sum of Rs. 50,000 allocated for creating dissensions between Hindus and Muslims remained unspent and had to be returned to the sanctioning authorities.⁷

Financial Measures:

The Most Important problem before the new Government was that of finances. As the troops had plundered the treasury and dishonest Government officials had decamped with the cash, the new government had to take immediate steps to raise funds to carry on the normal administration. Moreover, money was also needed for raising troops

and manufacturing arms and ammunitions to fight the British who had vast resources at their command. The new Government had no alternative but to tax the people, but it did not want to hurt them too much. The Government consulted Muftis and Pundits who advised it to ask people of means to pay a tax at the rate of 1/10 of their income/property. A Committee was appointed to assess the amounts of money that could be taken in the form of taxes from various persons. These taxes were imposed only on the rich and moneyed classes and the poor were not touched. It is true that some measure of force and coercion had to be adopted to extort the taxes from some persons but it was unavoidable. The Government needed money to raise troops to fight the British and it had to be raised by all means, fair or foul. It was done in the national interest and hence the Provisional Government was justified in using force to realize the taxes.

The Secular Nature of the Government.

The Provisional Government followed a secular policy and did not discriminate between Hindus and Muslims. People were appointed to various offices on the basis of their qualifications and experience.

A study of the official appointments made by the provisional Government shows (Table 1) that Hindu officials were in a majority (51.55%) in the Civil Administration they were in a minority in the Army (Table 2)

Table—1
CIVIL APPOINTMENTS UNDER THE PROVISIONAL
GOVERNMENT^s

S.No.	Department	Total No. of Appointments	No. of Muslim Officials	No of Hindu Officials	Percentage of Hindu Officials
1	ADMINISTRATIVE(ADVISORY)COUNCIL	4	3	1	25
2	Committee for the trial of cases.	8	6	2	25
3	Committee for the assessment of taxes.	5	0	5	100

S. No.	Department	Total No. of Appointments	No. of Muslim Officials	No. of Hindu Officials	Percentage of Hindu Officials
4	<i>Diwan Khana</i>	15	1	14	93.33
5	<i>Darul-Insha</i> (Secretariate)	16	11	5	31.25
6	Pandit	5	0	5	100
7	Nazim	7	1	6	85.71
8	MUFTI	4	3	1	25
9	Court of Appeal	1	1	0	0
10	Sadr Ameen	1	1	0	0
11	Magisterates Court	11	8	3	27.7
12	Sadrus-Sudar	1	1	0	0
13	Chief Tahsildar	6	3	3	50
14	<i>Munsifi</i>	3	3	0	0
15	Intelligence	2	0	2	100
16	<i>Bakhsigiri</i>	5	2	3	60
Total	—	97	47	50	51.55

Table—2

Number of Hindu and Muslim Officers in the Army.⁹

	Total No. of Officers	No. of Hindu Officers	No. of Muslim Officers	Percentage of Hindu Officers
CAVALRY	89	2	87	2.24
INFANTRY	55	6	49	10.9
Total	144	8	136	5.55

Though Hindu Officers were in minority in the army, it does not mean that they lagged behind Muslims in the defence of their country. There were many Hindu soldiers in the Army and even Shobha Ram, the Chief Minister, was said to have acted as military commander in the

battle field.¹⁰ Perhaps Muslim Officers were in a majority in the Armed forces owing to the ready availability of professional Pathan fighters, the descendents of Rohilla and Afghan soldiers of the Mughal army, who had settled in Katehr. The Hindu fighting men for the British Army, mostly Brahmins, came mainly from Avadh and Muslim soldiers were supplied by Rohilkhand and other regions.

The Hindu elite of Bareilly consisted mainly of Kayasthas Khattris and money-lending classes etc. which preferred to work in the civil Administration. Thakurs and Rajputs were large land-holders and were perhaps reluctant to leave their country seats. Khan Bahadur Khan and his advisers had full support of all communities. Even British Officers have referred to Khan Bahadur Khan's good treatment of Hindus and the latter's enthusiastic support to his government.¹¹

Conclusion.

It was unfortunate that the Indian patriots could not co-ordinate and unite all their resources and devise well-prepared and fully co-ordinated plans to fight the British on all fronts. The rebellions occurring at different places could not get support from each other, and the rebels were isolated and easily crushed by the Superior forces of the British. It is praiseworthy that the patriots in Rohilkhand held out against the British for more than a year and were the last to be defeated in North India. They would, undoubtedly, have succeeded if they had received support from other parts of India.

NOTES & REFERENCES

The author lectures on history at G. F. postgraduate College, Shahjahanpur- 242001.

- 1 *The Friend of India*. June 4, 1857.
- 2 Department XXIV, File No. 25 "Daily Narrative of Events of Badaun, Bareilly and Shahjahanpur from 12th May 1857 to 19th July, 1858". Bareilly Commissioner's office Mutiny Records. State Archives, U. P. Allahabad.
- 3 *The Mutiny of the Bengal Army. An Historical Narrative* (Red Pamphlet).
- 4 Telegraphic Message from G. F. Edmonstone, Allahabad, to E. A. Reade, Agra, dated 28th March 1859; also Bulletins dated 12th April 1858 (Daily Bulletins issued by E. A. Reade March-July 1858):
Also the *Hindoo Patriots* April 29, 1858

- 5 *Habibul Akhbar*. 24 Zidad 1273 A. H. (16th July, 1857)
- 6 *The Friend of India*. January 6th 1859, P. 3.
- 7 Foreign Secret consultations, No. 25. dated 27 August, 1858.
- 8 J. F. D. English, Narrative of the outbreak of Disturbances and Restoration of Authority at Bareilly during the year 1857-58, dated 30th. November, 1858 Appendix B pp 8-11.
- 9 *Mutiny Narratives*, N. W. P. Agra, Appendix B to the Bareilly Narrative pp 17-19.
- 10 Foreign Department, N. W. P., Narrative (Abstract Proceedings) 1858, Narrative of Events for Rohilkhand Division for the week ending 14th. Feb. 1858.
- 11 Letter No. 331 of 1858 from Commissioner, Rohilkhand to Secy to Govt. N.W.P. dated 30th November, 1858.