

# NATURE OF THE REVOLT OF 1857 IN BIHAR

Anuradha Jaiswal

There was a gigantic challenge to British political authority in India in the movement of 1857-59 and Bihar was an important part of the area affected by this movement? As regards the nature of the revolt of 1857 in Bihar, we have to judge this movement in the light of the following facts. For a movement to be called national, it is first of all necessary that the aim should be to free the country from foreign yoke. Secondly, there should be a common national endeavour to fulfill the aim. Thirdly, the people should be inspired by a sense of patriotism. Fourthly, it should be a mass movement. But we fail to discover any other leader in Bihar, never told the people about the aim of their movement. On the contrary, he was found to be repented for having led the sepoys and was apprehending misfortunes on this account. It would thus appear that the rebellion by the civil population in 1857 in Bihar may be regarded as a war of independence only if we take that term to mean any sort of struggle against the English.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the question as to whether it was a common national endeavour we have to remember that there is no clearcut indication to that effect. There are a few proclamation of the Muslim leaders of Bihar like Peer Ali and Waris Ali containing an appeal to the Muslims to fight against the infidels? This appeal was meant for the Hindus also. Apart from this fact, the so called leaders of the mutiny in Bihar, could set up no central organization with a well-defined commonly accepted and positive political programme as that of the Indian National Congress of the later days.<sup>4</sup> As to whether the people of Bihar were inspired by any sense of patriotism, we fail to discover any such feeling on the part of the people or even the leaders. On the contrary, the motives of some of the leaders were selfish and their interests local? For example, Kunwar Singh, Arjun Singha and Haider Ali fought on account of their personal grievances. The people also were actuated, in their opposition to the established authorities, by their selfish and particular motives.

Again a national movement is always a mass movement. E.A. Samuells, The Commissioner of Patna Division was of the opinion that the movement in Shahabad assumed all the dignity of a national revolt, as it was supported by a large number of zamindars? But we know in Bihar people of all classes did not take part in it, Though a few zamindars of Bihar had taken the leading part in the mutiny, a

majority of them remained loyal to the British government and helped it in crushing the revolt. In the various districts of Bihar, peasants, traders and company employees had not supported the movement enmasse. It was no doubt, a popular movement on a regional basis in Bihar. In the regions or zones which witnessed popular risings, the civil population rose in arms against the government but apparently they had no nationalist or political motive. Different sets of causes led to revolts in different areas of the province of Bihar. In this sense the revolt in Bihar, may be treated as having a regional character.<sup>7</sup> As far as Bihar is concerned we find that it was widely affected during the Mutiny of 1857-59 and that in several parts of the province, the revolt assumed a popular character. In Patna and Chotanagpur divisions the sepoys and civil population fought together against the British government. In Shahabad the Rajputs rose in arms under the leadership of Kunwar Singh. The revolting sepoys in Gaya were strengthened by large numbers of disaffected villagers and Bhojpuri men under the leadership of Jeodhar Singh and Haider Ali Khan. In Hazaribagh the Santhals, some local landholders, and the disposed Bhuiya Tikayats rose against the government. The activities of Nilambar and Pitambar in alliance with the Chero zamindars made Palamu a centre of a serious popular agitation during the mutiny. Singhbhum witnessed a struggle of the sepoys in conjunction with the Kols and other tribes of the district under the leadership of Arjun Singh. In Manbhum the sepoys, the Santhals and the Raja of Panchet estate, Nilmoni Singh rose in revolt against the government. In Sambhalpur, the mutinous sepoys in their struggle against the government were led by Surendra Sahi, Udwant Sahi and other leaders from the civil ranks. In Patna, the Wahabi Muslims took the leading part. The revolt at Dinapur had a military origin, while the revolt in Hazaribagh had its repercussions on Ranchi and Sambhalpur.

In West Bihar and Chotanagpur, the movement of 1857-59 had a popular basis. In East Bihar, though there were risings of the Indian soldiers here and there, the civil population remained, on the whole, quiet and peaceful. While considering whether the movement in Bihar, was national or not, a very important question arises, as to whether it was a part of an all India movement or not. If it was a part of an all India movement, then in that case, the nature of the movement in Bihar, will not be different from the all India movement. The movement first began in Meerut and then it spread to other parts of the country including Bihar. We cannot therefore isolate Bihar from the rest of the country. The mutiny first broke out among the sepoys and then other men joined it. It happened in India as a whole and in Bihar as well. A

striking feature of the mutiny in Bihar was that it was not an isolated affair.

When the revolt broke out in Meerut on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1857 it cast its shadow over Bihar where a number of agents were sent to work up the revolt. Waris Ali was one of them, who was sent to this province to mobilize support for the Emperor of Delhi, and to prepare the ground for mutiny in the province. An important leader of the movement at Patna, Peer Ali Khan, who had shot Dr Lyell was an emissary from Lucknow." This however was not a one way traffic. Leaders of Bihar also went out to other provinces and participated in the revolt at those places. For example Kunwar Singh, after his defeat at the hands of British forces at Jagdishpur on 12 August 1857 went to Mirzapur, Rewa and Banda where he effected a junction with Tantiya Tope early in October 1857. Thereafter he went to Lucknow and Kanpur and fought along with them and Nana Sahib at the battle of Kanpur in December 1857. After the death of Kunwar Singh his brother Amar Singh took part in the movement outside Bihar. After Nana Sahib's retreat to Nepal in October 1859, Amar Singh again went to the Terai region to assume the leadership of Bala and Nana Rao's troops. <sup>11</sup> Thus we find that the leaders of the revolt in Bihar maintained close connection with the leaders of the movement outside the province.

Kunwar Singh was generally looked upon as their natural leader by all those who had revolted in Bihar. For instance the rebels of Dinapur, Chotanagpur, Manbhum, Singhbhum and Palamau, wanted to work together under his common leadership. Jadunath Shahi (son-in-law of Kunwar Singh's brother Dayal Singh) who had taken a leading part at Ranchi was regarded by the local people as an agent of Kunwar Singh. <sup>12</sup> Raja Arjun Singh of Porhat (Singhbhum) and his brother also wanted to fight under the leadership of Kunwar Singh. A good number of letters to or from Arjun Singh have been preserved in the State Central Records Office at Patna, These letters clearly show that the Raja was carrying on correspondence with persons in and outside the province of Bihar? <sup>3</sup> All these suggest that there was some sort of pre-planning and coordination among the various leaders in Bihar. In almost every part of the province local leaders were in touch with Kunwar Singh or were fighting directly under him. Again the fact that when the sepoys of Dinapur revolted they went straight to Kunwar Singh also suggests that they had an idea of Kunwar Singh's intention and they wanted to act in coordination with him. When the sepoys of Bhagalpur mutinied on 14 August 1857, they sent a messenger to Dhumka to seek support of the detachment there. This also shows that they did not want the movement to remain isolated. <sup>14</sup>

From the study of the movement in Bihar, it appears that Kunwar Singh did not start the movement. We do not also have sufficient evidence to establish that Kunwar Singh had planned its outbreak in Bihar. Kunwar Singh's intention may be judged from the fact that on the eve of the outbreak at Dinapur, he had only sent his agents to ascertain the situation. But his agents, Harekrishna Singh and Ripudaman Singh, gave an invitation to the sepoys on behalf of Kunwar Singh. Kunwar Singh was reluctant to extend his support even when the sepoys had reached Arrah. He was hard-pressed by his associates and he agreed to lead them only when he was told that the sepoys would plunder Jagdishpur if he refused to lead them.<sup>15</sup> We get the same impression when we find that after his defeat at the hands of the British force, he was moving towards Sasaram and at one stage, he began repenting what he had done. Under the circumstances, it seems probable that if the British government had not given up the management of his estates, Kunwar Singh would not have openly raised the standard of revolt. Thus with regard to Kunwar Singh, we can say that his participation in the mutiny was not premeditated. The case of Raja Arjun Singh of Porhat in Singhbhum was similar.<sup>16</sup> But there are historians such as Chattopadhyaya, as well as others, who do not regard the mutiny as sporadic in character. In their support they have cited the story of the distribution of chappatis. However we do not find any evidence of distribution of chappatis in Bihar.<sup>17</sup>

That the mutiny might have been pre-planned is evident from the fact that the Muslims of the Wahabi sect in Patna had been engaged in a general conspiracy against the government for some time past. The murder of Dr Lyell indicates this.<sup>18</sup> The statement of Imamuddin, who was wounded and captured on that occasion, also supports this view. Imamuddin had confessed before Talyer, that he had been engaged by Peer Ali Khan and that he along with others was receiving regular payments for the last three months?<sup>9</sup> The element of pre-planned may also be deduced from the fact that on 23<sup>rd</sup> June, Robertson, the Assistant Magistrate of Tirhut arrested in very suspicious circumstances, a police jemadar named Waris Ali, in whose possession were found numerous letters from Maulvi Ali Karim of Dumri. From these letters, it was clear that Waris Ali engaged in a secret conspiracy.<sup>20</sup>

We need not believe that the revolting sepoys of Bihar received the universal sympathy and support of the civil population. At Sasaram, for example, the mutinous sepoys did not get the support of the common people. In Bhagatpur and Monghyr there was practically no uprising. Purnea was only slightly affected by the mutiny. The revolt in Satna remained confined to the army. No disturbance took place at

Darbhanga. In Tirhut the mutiny of sepoys could not make any headway because the local Rajas and zamindars remained loyal to the British government. Muzaffarpur was calm and peaceful when the Dinapur mutiny took place. The Muslims of south Bihar remained more or less quiet except of Patna where the Rajput and Brahmin villages around the city rose in arms.<sup>11</sup> Very few among the peasantry, the tenant farmers, and the tradesmen, took part in the rebellion. The general people of the town of Patna were favourably disposed towards the British government. With regard to the attitude of the Company's employees, we can say that in the Patna division the British never found many difficulty during this uprising in obtaining the services of policemen and soldiers, many of whom gave evidence of their fidelity by laying down their lives in the service of the British.<sup>12</sup>

As to the nature of the movement in Bihar, the first thing which strikes us is that although there has been a lot of controversy over the issue of whether it was a merely a 'Sepoy Mutiny' or not, we cannot fail to discover that the mutiny first broke out among the sepoys and then other men joined it. Many sections of the people were discontented against British rule but they lacked the courage to rise in revolt. They were waiting for someone to lead. That lead was given by the sepoys of Dinapur in Bihar. Since a large number of common people joined the mutiny, historians have been divided in their opinion as to whether it was a national movement or not. On this question, we have to work under a serious handicap. Since it was part of an all India movement, we cannot make an isolated study of its nature in Bihar. Again if we try to discern the marks of a nationalist movement in it we shall probably fail in our endeavour. Moreover, nationalist movements in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were unknown in this country. Therefore we cannot successfully apply the touchstone of nationalism to the movement. We can, however, say that the movements were widespread in the province of Bihar. To be more accurate we may say that it was a popular movement on a regional basis in Bihar. It was part of an all India movement. Therefore we find a close connection among the leaders of the movement in Bihar and other provinces.

As to whether the mutiny was personal or sectional we will do well to remember that although a few leaders had certain personal grievances against the British government, there were a large number of others to whom we cannot attribute any personal motive. As to the classes which took part in the revolt, we cannot make any generalization. Different sections were active in different districts. The mutineers in Bihar did not receive universal support of the civil population. In some districts a large number of people supported the movement, in others the leaders got lukewarm support of the people.

Most of the zamindars of Shahabad came out in support of the rebels. But in other parts the support of this class was not very enthusiastic. The Rajas of Dumraon, Hathwa, Bettiah, the Maharaja of Darbhanga were on the side of the British. Similarly the zamindars also did not as a body support or oppose the mutiny. The territorial and landed aristocrats of Bihar were, on the whole friendly to the British government.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. Chattopadhyaya, op.cit., p.202.
5. Ibid.
6. Samuells E.A., Commissioner of Patna, *Report on the Police of the Patna Division for 1857*, p.5,
7. Chattopadhyaya, op.cit., p. 199.
8. *The Englishman and Military Chronicle*, dated 15 July 1857 (this news was reported from Patna, dated 12 July 1857).
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10. William Forbes Mitchell, *reminiscences of the Great Mutiny, 1857-59*, pp.138-139.
11. Foreign Political Consultation, No.160, dated 4 November 1859, 'National Archives of India, New Delhi,
12. Datta. t/nnejr *Against British Rule etc.*, p,63; Letter from J.S. Davies to the Commissioner of Chotanagpur, dated 29<sup>th</sup> October 1857, State Central Records Office, Patna.
13. Ibid., p.76.
14. Major Macdonald, commanding late 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment to Mayhew Adjutant-General of the Army, Calcutta, *Parliamentary Paper's No,135 of 1859*, 'Papers relating to the East India Mutiny',
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16. Datta, *Unrest Againt British*, pp.69-70.
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18. The Commission of Patna to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated 14 July 1857; *Parliamentary Papers*, Vol.44, Part 11 of 1857-58, paper No.c.2316, p.14, enclose 33 in No.2.
19. Ibid,
20. Cited in Chattopadhyayay, op.cit., 118; *The Englishman and Mlitary Chronicle*, dated 15 July 1857 (This news was reported from Patna, dated 12 July 1857),
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22. Samutils, E.A., Commissioner of Patna, *Report on the Police of the Patna Division for 1857*, dated 25 September 1858, p.8, Centraj Records Office, Patna.