

INDIA'S FIRST WAR OF INDEPENDENCE, AND THE LEGACY OF HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY

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Large sections of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs together challenged the greatest imperialist power, Britain, during India's first war of independence which began on May 10, 1857. This extraordinary unity, naturally, unnerved the firangees and made them realise that if their rule was to continue in India, it could happen only when Hindus and Muslims, the two largest religious communities, were divided along communal lines. Urgent steps were taken to create enmity between these two groups. This was the reason, that immediately after crushing militarily this liberation war, the then Minister of Indian affairs, Lord Wood, sitting in London, confessed: "We have maintained our power in India by playing off one part against the other and we must continue to do so. Do all we can, therefore, to prevent all having a common feeling."

To put this strategy into operation, the British rulers — with their Indian stooges — came up with the theory that Hindus and Muslims belonged to two separate nations. The birth of the two-nation theory was no accident: It was specifically created to help the British in creating a communal divide.

One crucial truth, about this struggle, is that it was jointly led by leaders like Nana Sahib, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Maulvi Ahmed Shah, Tantya Tope, Khan Bahadur Khan, Rani Laxmibai, Hazrat Mahal, Azimullah Khan and Ferozshah — a galaxy of revolutionaries who belonged to different religions. It was a liberation struggle in which maulvis, pandits, granthis, zamindars, peasants, traders, lawyers, women, students and people from different castes, creeds and regions rose in revolt against the dehumanising rule of the East India Company.

On the 163rd anniversary of the war of independence, we need to remind the contemporary flagbearers of communal politics that the revolutionary army which declared the Mughal King Bahadur Shah Zafar, a Muslim, India's ruler on May 11, 1857, comprised more than 70 per cent Hindu soldiers.

The documents of the period are replete with instances in which Hindus and Muslims could be seen making supreme sacrifices together.

After Independence, Ayodhya emerged as a locus of the rise of hatred between sections of Hindus and Muslims. The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute played a significant role in creating an environment of violence and mistrust between the two communities. But in 1857, in Ayodhya, maulvis and mahants, and ordinary Hindus and Muslims, stood united against British rule. Maulana Ameer Ali was a famous maulvi of Ayodhya and when the well-known Hanuman Garhi's (Hanuman Temple) priest, Baba Ramcharan Das, took the lead in organising the armed resistance to British rule, the maulana followed him. In a battle with the British and their stooges, both of them were captured and hanged together on a tamarind tree at the Kuber Teela (now in Faizabad Jail) in Ayodhya.

This region also produced two other great friends, from different religions, who made life hell for the British-sponsored armies. Acchan Khan and Shambhu Prasad Shukla led the army of Raja Devibaksh Singh in the district of Faizabad. They were able to defeat the British forces in many battles. It was due to treachery, again, that they were captured. To discourage Hindu-Muslim unity, both of them were publicly tortured. Their heads were filed off.

The joint heritage of Ayodhya needed to be erased if the British rule was to survive.

Kota state (now in Rajasthan) was ruled by a Maharao subservient to the British. When the leading courtier, Lala Jaidayal Bhatnagar, a great literary figure, found out that Maharao was collaborating with the British, he joined hands with the army chief, Mehrab Khan, and established a rebel government in the state. When Kota was captured by the British with the help of neighbouring princes, together they continued the fight in the region till 1859. Betrayed by an informer, both were hanged on September 17, 1860.

Hansi town (now in Haryana) presents another heart-warming example of how Muslims and Jains fearlessly challenged foreign rule. Here, two close friends, Hukumchand Jain and Muneer Beg, were known as literary giants and for their love of mathematics. The government of Bahadur Shah Zafar chose them as advisors and appointed them as commanders in the region west of Delhi. They led many successful military campaigns but due to the treachery of the native rulers of Patiala, Nabha, Kapurthala, Kashmir and Pataudi, they were defeated in a crucial battle and captured. The British, highly perturbed by this kind of unity, decided to kill them in the most sickening manner. After hanging them on the same tree in Hansi on January 19, 1858, Hukumchand Jain was buried and Muneer Beg was cremated — against the custom of their respective religions.

We all are familiar with Rani Laxmi Bai's heroic resistance to the British rule and her death fighting the British at Gwalior. She was able to put up incredible resistance with her Muslim commanders — Ghulam Ghouse Khan (chief of artillery) and Khuda Bakhsh (chief of infantry) — both of whom were martyred defending Jhansi fort on June 4, 1858. Even her personal bodyguard was a young Muslim lady, Munzar, who laid down her life with Rani on June 18, 1858, at Kotah-ki-Sarai battle in Gwalior.

Malwa region in the then Central Province (now Madhya Pradesh) was another theatre where crucial battles were fought against the British. The joint command of Tantya Tope, Rao Saheb, Laxmi Bai, Feroezshah and Moulvi Fazal Haq, was able to mobilise a huge rebel army of 70-80 thousand fighters. This army won innumerable battles. However, in a crucial battle at Ranod when, due to the treachery of stooge princes yet again, the revolutionary army led by Tope, Ferozeshah and Moulvi was encircled. Fazal Haq stood like a rock in the way of advancing British troops. Fazal Haq and his 480 companions laid down their lives on December 17, 1858, and were able to save the main force which included Tope, Rao Saheb and Ferozeshah. Thus, saved by the supreme sacrifice of Fazal Haq and his comrades, Tope continued to wage war till the beginning of 1859.

An area which includes present-day Bareilly, Shahjahanpur, Badaun and Bijnor, was the stronghold of revolutionaries from the beginning. On May 11, 1857, Khan Bahadur Khan was appointed as the viceroy of the Mughal emperor to the region. Soon after assuming charge, Khan appointed a committee of eight members consisting of both Hindus and Muslims to conduct the affairs of the state. His deputy was Khushi Ram. This government forbade cow-slaughter in deference to the sentiments of local Hindus. Khan and Khushi Ram led troops that defeated the British in many battles but were, unfortunately, defeated in a crucial battle at Bareilly. Both of them were hanged with hundreds of their followers on March 20, 1860.

William Russell, a war correspondent, was sent by The Times, London, to cover the "Mutiny". In one of his reports dated March 2, 1858, while underlining the unity among the ranks of the rebel army he wrote: "All the great chiefs of Oudh, Mussalman and Hindu, are there, and have sworn to fight for their young king, Birjis Kuddr [sic], to the last. Their cavalry is numerous, the city is filled with people, the works are continually strengthened. All Oudh is in the hands of the enemy, and we only hold the ground we cover with our bayonets."

Another senior British officer, Thomas Lowe, admitted that “the infanticide (sic) Rajput, the bigoted Brahmin, the fanatic Mussalman, and the luxury-loving, fat-paunched ambitious Maharattah [sic], they all joined together in the cause; the cow-killer and the cow-worshipper, the pig-hater and the pig-eater, the crier of Allah is God and Mohommed [sic] his prophet and the numbler of the mysteries of Brahma.”

Given these realities of history, it is not difficult to understand why a divide between the Hindus and Muslims was necessitated, who were instrumental in accomplishing this rupture and who benefited from it. The survival of the British empire in India depended on the successful execution of this strategy of divide-and-rule. The flag-bearers of the politics of the two-nation theory in the past, and of communal politics today, are the ones who helped the British execute their evil design. We should never ignore the fact that communalism was a ploy of the British who feared the end of their Empire in India if Hindus and Muslims continually stood united.

On the 163rd anniversary of the great rebellion, we must pledge to never betray the shared heritage and martyrs of the first Indian war for Independence.

The writer taught political science at the University of Delhi

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