

The Role of Farmers of Meerut Region In 1857

Dr. K.K. Sharma

M.M P.G. College Modinagar
(Ghaziabad, U.P)

ABSTRACT:

The Villagers of Baraut and other areas to the west and north-west of Meerut did what few could imagine doing. They fought a much superior military force by organizing an army through their limited means. They fought against British rifles and military artillery with spears and swords. They fought hard till death and even when most of their leadership was lost, they stood fiercely independent in their own right till there was no hope left for these peasants due to the fall of Delhi. How many died for their and our freedom there is no count. The British never thought their lives worthwhile to even leave the names of all the villages they destroyed. These simple farmers paid dearly firm till end this leaves us with sentiments of pride and humility.

An army fights on its stomach this is a well-known adage. Many a poor general has lost even through leading a fine band of soldiers when he neglected his supply lines. Cut the supply line of a military force and it is doomed. The revolutionaries who captured and held on to Delhi also needed a large quantity of food and other resources regularly. It was the people of Baraut and many other parts of Meerut who were the main suppliers of rations and other necessities to Delhi in that that difficult hour. The proximity of this region to Delhi was one reason, but the upper Gunga-Yammuna Doab has also been the traditional breadbasket of Delhi. In the difficult days of the uprising of 1857, the villagers of this region took this role earnestly and kept up the supplies to Delhi, feeding the revolutionaries there, as well as making sure that the revenue supply to the British administration is completely stopped. The British had to launch continuous operations against the villages to start the flow of revenue and stop the flow of supplies to rebels in Delhi.

The important role played by the villagers of this region is further enhanced by their working in coordination with the Delhi revolutionaries for other tactical purposes. The bridge across Yamuna from Baghpat was the main link of communication between the Headquarter camp of the British near Delhi and Meerut cantonment. It was also used for troop movement by the British as they could not use the bridge of boats on the Yamuna that was beyond Ghaziabad on the main road to Delhi from Meerut, as this opened directed under the walls of Delhi. This was the reason why it was through the boat bridge at Baghpat, on the morning of the 6th June 1857, that Wilson's force reached and met the rest of the British forces on the west bank of the Yamuna, after their fight on the Hindon bridge with the Delhi revolutionaries on the 30th and 31st May, 1857. The breaking of this bridge was a very strategic move on the part of the revolutionary leader Shah Mull as concerns the cutting off of the Head-Quater camp from the British forces to east of the Yamuna.

BABA SHAH MULL:

Shah Mull was a jat leader belonging to Bijroul. He was the leader of a khap of villages (chaurasi). At the time of the uprising he was around 60 years of age. He was one of the rich and prosperous farmers of the area and held considerable clout in the whole region. He comes out as the first prominent farmer leader of this part of India.

He started operating and organizing the revolution against British rule just after the Meerut outbreak, but his activities started taking concrete shape around 30th or 31st May, 1857. During this Time many people in north and north-western parts of Meerut region began to openly transfer allegiance to the king of Delhi and completely annihilated British government's authority. As stated, they also started collection and

transmission of supplies from Baraut to Delhi. Before 16th July and before the Seekree action Shah Mal attacked Baghpat and also destroyed the bridge of boats on the Yamuna, the direct and only communication between Meerut and the British Head quarter camp.

The conditions created through the activities of Shah Mal and the farmer rebels of Baraut were such that the British authorities at Meerut had to send an urgent message to Head-quarters camp to send some troops so that an attack could be mounted on that region to open the direct communication through Baghpat which had been broken by Shah Mal and prevent the supplies reaching Delhi from this region. The request was made because the revolutionaries there were thought to be too powerful for the force of volunteers that was usually sent out of Meerut cantonment to attack villages in the district.

The Headquarter camp gave the permission for deployment of British soldiers of active service posted at Meerut cantonment with the volunteer corps (the khaki Risallah) to fight the revolutionaries of Baghpat, through no soldiers were sent from the Headquarter camp itself.

ATTACK ON BAGHPAT BY THE BRITISH FORCE UNDER WILLIAMS:

On the 16th July a force started from Meerut at 2 A.M. they reached Hindon River and on its banks heard heavy firing ahead of them. They were informed that Shah Mull with 3000 revolutionaries was about to attack village Deolah which was supporting the British and had helped European travellers. It was difficult for the British force to cross the Hindon at this point and they were able to cross it much later after finding a suitable place only on the 17th July, between 1 and 2 A.M. The British force had known that Shah Mull was camped at Busodh, about 2 miles north of Deolah, and a force of mounted volunteers was sent to this place. But Shah Mull had got information about the arrival of the British force. He decided to withdraw in a tactical retreat to organise a proper planned confrontation. So when the mounted volunteers reached Busodh, They found that he had already left the place in the night, but in quite a hurry as many cooking vessels were found here.

BRAVE PEOPLE OF BUSODH:

Though their leader had withdrawn from Busodh in a tactical retreat, the villagers of Busodh decided to fight with their own simple means against the advancing British force. The villagers of this single village, with their primitive weapons, fought organized British troop without aid from quarter.

But the people of Busodh paid a heavy price for their great act. Simple villagers with simple tools tried to fight an organized force of the British Army. They stood no chance. All the males of the village were killed. Two Ghazees from Delhi were among the villagers of Busodh and they fought very hard in a mosque till death.

The British force burnt down the village. There were huge store of grain found here and these were meant for the revolutionaries fighting in Delhi. The British tried to burn the grain, as they did not have the means to carry it off to Meerut. But the rain had soaked the thatches with which it was covered and the revolutionaries had hidden gunpowder within the grain and there were many explosions from it.

The brave revolutionary villagers were still ready for a fight even after all that had happened in the past few hours in their village, even after they had seen so many of their relatives and friends hung from trees by the British. As soon as the main body of British soldiers marched out of Busodh, many villagers who had hidden themselves in the fields around the village came out and attacked Dr. Cannon and 10 soldiers who were left with him. The main British force immediately turned back and attacked these villagers; about 180 of them were killed in this second attack. The British then returned to Deolah.

The final fight

On the 18th morning the above British force then started marching along the Eastern Yamuna Canal to reach Baraut. But they must have known about the degree of revolutionary zeal among the villagers who were organizing themselves all around to give a fight to this British colonial force. They were sending the message to organize through beating of drums whose sound could be heard all around and emanating from

every village. The few overzealous British officers who tried to move away from the advancing column and go out into the countryside were immediately attacked by the villagers and had to flee for their life. The villagers were also seen moving out to collect at a point to face and fight the British force. When the British force reached Baraut, its advance guard was attacked by villagers and about 30 of them lost their lives in this initial skirmish.

Shah Mull had taken position in a large orchard. He then personally led an attack on the British force with about 3500 villagers. The infantry i.e. the 60 Rifles advanced into the orchard onto the revolutionaries. When they were made to break out of the orchard into a field of corn standing behind it, the Cavalry i.e. the mounted volunteers charged them after encircling the orchard. Shah Mull and his companions gave a hand-to-hand fight but died fighting. He had been killed by A. Tonnochy aided by who else, two native (Indian) soldiers working under his command.

But even after his death the villagers did not fall back but charged a third time on to the British force from a new direction. But this time their spears and swords etc. had to take on the might of British artillery (Mountain train guns) followed by the advance of the British soldiers. The overall fight lasted more than 3 hours. A. Tonnochy was also injured in his fight with the group led by Shah Mull. He was injured by a spear thrust at him during the fight and he narrowly escaped.

On the night of the 18th the British force encamped on the right bank of the Yamuna Canal. The head of the great revolutionary Shah Mull was demonstrated publicly.

RETREAT OF WILLIAM'S FORCE:

As stated earlier, no force could instill fear into the minds of these brave villagers, however harsh the reprisals may be. They were organizing themselves for another bigger and more powerful attack on the British force on the morning of 19th July. A large body of villagers, specially the Jats, were collecting for this purpose. The commander of the British force, Major Williams was informed about this through intelligence and so he decided to march off towards Meerut in the night of 18th July itself. He also requested the Meerut station to provide additional force to protect his passage beyond Hindon in view of the treat of the villagers. The British force left the monsoon season in India. They crossed the rivulet of Krishna and then Hindon to camp on its other bank at Harrah.

MASSACRE AT GARHEE:

An additional British force was then sent from Meerut to join the larger field force. They also reached Hindon, but through there was a lot of beating of drums in all the villages around, there was no direct confrontation any more. Therefore the two forces then marched down to Sardhana, and met and encamped there.

The villagers were still not ready to surrender before the of British military authority. The British magistrate sent summons to the headman of the villager Gurhee as the villagers from here had attacked Sardhana on the 11th of May. He did not bow down to British authority and sent a strongly worded reply (rebellious answer Mutiny memoirs para 280/2). On the 22nd of July the whole British force then marched onto this village and undertook a massacre of all male members there.

THE CONTINUED STRUGGLE:

As stated earlier too, the villagers of Baraut and the rest of western part of the then Meerut district were not to be kept down. The grandson of Shah Mull named Sulla with the nephew of Shah Mull named Bhugta continued to organize the villagers and resist British authority. The villagers of this region again, even after all the atrocities committed on them till that date, openly started when asked to give revenue by British revenue agents that they will give revenue only to the king Delhi. The rebellion was spreading rather than abetting as the British authorities thought would happen after the massacres. The villagers of Muzzafarnagar

were also coordinating with the revolutionaries to the west of Meerut. There were many instances of open opposition to authority, two of them have been specially noted out-

1)the people of Nagla drove out British revenue and government servants who had reached there to collected revenue.

2)The people of Panchlee Buzurg fought with the police and released a person that they were taking away. The British authorities then again launched an operation against these revolutionary villagers . On the 13th of July,the villages of Nagla, Bhopra and part Panchlee Buzurg were destroyed and many revolutionary villagers were hanged.

Even after many operations including massacres undertaken against the villagers crush the fire of the revolt, even till late July, the British authorities of Meerut were not in control of the whole of Barout region, the region of Muradnagar tehsil upto Delhi and the lands beyonds Hapur which were under Wulleedad Khan. The villagers of Meerut region, with their small arms and little resources, were able to fight off and stay independent till the fall of Delhi against a well organized, trained British Military force. They organized themselves fought and died together, forgetting traditional divisions of cast intelligence and stood up to fight for their freedom against colonialism. It was an achievement never to be repeated in the western part of U.P. till 1947. Shah Mull comes out in all this as a great leader and organizer.

References:

1. Mutiny Memories of the united provinces.
2. A history if the great revolt, John William Kaye.
3. The journal of the Meerut University, History Alnmni, Vol VII, 2006