

War of Independence 1857 and the Peshawar Valley

ABSTRACT

During the War of Independence 1857-58, the areas, including Peshawar, which are now called Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were part of the Punjab Province. When the news of outbreak of war reached at Lahore and Peshawar, the people of Punjab started preparations to rise against the foreign rule. The British had to face many uprisings in the Punjab and the people rose against them at Gugera, Murree, Sialkot, Jhelum, Multan, Ludhiana and Peshawar. Like other areas the British succeeded to crush the freedom-fighters in the Punjab as well as at Peshawar by using their famous strategy 'divide and rule'. The freedom-fighters had no organization and did not have coordination among themselves. Unfortunately a large section of the local population especially the elites of the Peshawar valley decided to stand with the foreign rulers for their personal interests. The present study narrates the events of war at Peshawar valley and the atrocities inflicted upon the people of Peshawar by the British imperialists to crush the movement.

* Department of History, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Pakistan

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The Valley of Peshawar was a part of the Punjab until the end of the nineteenth century.¹ The news of the outbreak of the War of Independence at Meerut and Delhi reached Peshawar late in the night on May 11, 1857. Two days later, a Council of War was held, and a Moveable Column was organized.² Peshawar was an important city. It was evident that the capture of Peshawar by the freedom-fighters would endanger the British position in the entire area of the Punjab and North-west. A Sikh described the importance of Peshawar in an interesting way. On being asked by an officer why was he so anxious about Peshawar, the Sikh, while rolling up the end of his scarf, replied, "If Peshawar goes, the whole Punjab will be rolled up in rebellion like this".³

In 1857, at Peshawar there were about 3000 European soldiers as well as officers, while the native force amounted to above 10,000, of whom some 9000 at least were actually purabiyas. Of native troops, there were five regular infantry regiments, the 21st, 24th, 27th, 51st and 64th, with some sappers, about 100 men, the 5th Regular Light Cavalry, and the 7th and 18th Irregular Cavalry.⁴ On hearing the news of the War at Meerut and Delhi and smelling some indications of uprising among the sepoys, the British decided to disarm them. A parade was ordered at 7 a.m. in the morning of May 22, in order to disarm the 5th Light Cavalry and the 24th, 27th and 51st Regiments of N.I. At the appointed hour, the troops paraded under arms, while the two European Regiments (Her Majesty's 70th and 87th) and the Artillery took positions at the two ends of the cantonment, within sight of the parades, ready to enforce obedience if necessary. The sepoys were completely taken aback, they were allowed no time to consult. The whole laid down their arms.⁵ Then the British authorities decided to disarm the 10th Irregular Cavalry. Part of this regiment was in Peshawar, part in Nowshera. Both were simultaneously dealt with. On June 26, their arms, horses and property were taken from them and confiscated,

and all of them were hurried down to Attock, where they were dismissed with two rupees each, just enough to carry them to their homes.⁶

On the night of the disarming (May 21), about two hundred and fifty of the sepoy of the 51st N.I. deserted and fled in different directions. Herbert Edwardes (d. 1867), the Commissioner of Peshawar, immediately issued an order putting a price on every deserter. This convinced the greedy people to help the British in capturing the sepoy and to get money as rewards. This British policy of dividing the people proved effective in creating antagonism and hatred among the different sections of the people. The result was that the local people were looking for the freedom-fighters like hungry hunters. Therefore, many freedom-fighters were promptly seized by the people of District Peshawar and the police. The ringleader, the Subedar-Major of the Regiment, was hanged before the whole garrison on parade, and was the first freedom-fighter to be executed at Peshawar.⁷

On the night of May 21, the British authorities at Peshawar were informed that some companies of the 55th N.I. had risen at Nowshera. The 55th N.I. (with the exception of some 120 men) broke from the fort, and fled tumultuously towards the Swat hills. Colonel Nicholson (d. 1857) carried out brutal execution amongst them. The 55th fought determinately but they were forced to disperse in the neighbouring villages, about one hundred and fifty of them died resisting, and about the same number were taken prisoners, and thrice that number must have been wounded. The people of the Lundkhur Valley received them with favour, and about six hundred managed to enter Swat.

Under the influence of their religious leader, Abd al-Ghaffur, popularly known as Akhund Sahib, the people of Swat had accepted Syed Akbar Shah as their ruler. When he died on May 11, 1857, his son, Syed Mubarak Shah, claimed his father's successor. The majority of the people, however, were against him. It was about this time when the sepoy arrived in Swat. The young prince, Mubarak immediately took them into his service, but he had no money to maintain

an army. The Akhund Sahib, however, told them to leave the Valley and expell Mubarak Shah from the Valley.⁸ Edwardes wrote in his official report about the significance of the order:⁹

Had the Akhund of Swat at this time, standing forward as the Champion of the faith, preached a crescentade against us, and hushing intestine strife, moved across the passes and descended into Peshawar Valley, with all the prestige of the 55th sepoy in his favour, I do not doubt that he would have excited among our subjects that spirit of religious zeal which may be overlaid for a while, but never extinguished by material prosperity. Instead of this he suddenly sided with the popular party, dismissed the 55th sepoy with guides to conduct them across the Indus and expelled the young King from Swat.

Another important incident was the Battle of Narinji. A small group of the sepoy of the 55th N.I. had accompanied the expelled ruler of Swat, Syed Mubarak Shah, into the Valley of Panjtar, where a colony of the freedom-fighters had grown up under the leadership of Maulvi Inayat Ali (d. 1858), a successor of Syed Ahmad Shaheed (d. 1831). Maulvi Inayat Ali had been preaching *jihad* (religious war) in the neighbouring area for some time, and a number of people had come under his influence, including the Khan of Panjtar, Muqarrab Khan. The Khan sent a small party of freedom-fighters under the command of his cousin, Mir Baz Khan, towards Mardan to "raise the standard of the Prophet". The British under Major Vaughan attacked the freedom-fighters on July 2, and killed Mir Baz Khan, and arrested other leaders, including Jan Muhammad Khan and Malik Zarif, and hanged them. Two villages were completely burnt, and some other were set on fire. The freedom-fighters, however, continued their work.

Maulvi Inayat Ali now set up his headquarters at Narinji, and planted there the standard of the freedom-fighters. The village had a small population of about four hundred souls. They were devoted to the cause of freedom, and acknowledged the authority of Maulvi Inayat Ali. Thus, to quote the sarcastic

remarks of H.B. Edwardes, Commissioner of Peshawar Division, "The holy war seemed auspiciously opened with every requisite, a priest, a banner, a fastness, a howling crowd of bigots and several days' provisions".¹⁰ On July 21, Captain James attacked this small group of freedom-fighters with strong force. Nevertheless, they put up a determined resistance. According to Cave-Browne, within few minutes the peaceful labourer converted into an armed soldier, and every hut into a fortress. Several freedom-fighters rushed but they were quickly killed by the 2nd Cavalry, and the lower part of the village was soon mastered and set on fire. In spite of all this, freedom-fighters continued their control over the remaining portion of the village.¹¹ The British started waiting for reinforcement from Peshawar to renew the assault. On August 3, on the arrival of reinforcement from Peshawar, the British attacked, and consequently, the freedom-fighters fled and the village was utterly destroyed.¹²

From Peshawar, reports were reaching the British officers that arms locally made were being purchased, and probably secreted in the lines, the 27th N.I. and 51st were suspected the most. On August 28, an order was issued that the sepoy were to move out into tents on the plain near their respective parade grounds; precautions were also taken by their officers to meet resistance in case it was offered. The evacuation of the lines began early in the morning and was carried out without any mention-worthy incident.

About midday when the work of search was still going on, the sepoy posted at quarter-ground in the lines of the 51st N.I. made a sudden rush on Captain Bartlett, who was supervising the operations. Simultaneously with this, started the rising of the entire Regiment. Then followed a brief, but contested, action in which, "the sepoy fought well".¹³ They were, however, overpowered by the British who had the advantage of superior arms and equipment, and "then began that memorable fusillade which commenced on the parade at Peshawar, and ended at Jumrood".¹⁴ The losses of the sepoy were heavy, 660 out of a total of 871 were either "killed in the

pursuit or subsequently executed by sentence of court martial".¹⁵

After suffering great hardships, the freedom-fighters decided to go to Kashmir, their route lay through Hazara. On June 23, Major Becher, the Deputy Commissioner of District Hazara, was informed of their movements by Muhammad Khan Malik of Buttul in Kounsh. He had enclosed with his note a letter from Jamal Khan, an influential member of the *Jirgah* (Council of Elders) of Ullye, asking for assistance and safe passage for six hundred Hindustani soldiers. They had crossed the Indus on rafts of skins, and halted by the side of the river near Jamal Khan's village. Becher directed the Syeds of Kaghan, the sons of Muzaffar Khan of Nundyar and some other leading persons, to collect their followers and secure the passes at the head of the Pakhli Valley, now a part of District Hazara. On the following day (June 24), Becher left Abbottabad and reached Dodyal, which was three miles from Shinkiyari, and controlled all the principal roads. On June 27, the freedom-fighters came to the village of Raeshung on the Nundyar border, but turned back, and on the following morning, went to another village which belonged to Syed Ghulam Ali Shah and Syed Dilaram Shah. Becher succeeded in persuading the Syeds to attack the freedom-fighters. In the contest, Ghulam Ali Shah's son was wounded. This annoyed the Syeds and their *murids* (disciples).

Becher had succeeded in thoroughly exciting the Syeds of Kaghan against the freedom-fighters, who had by this time (July 5) reached a place called Bela Sanpan. They were surrounded and attacked by the Syeds of Kaghan and the residents of Kohistan. Becher now sent word to another chief, Sher Ahmad Khan, who was a vassal of the Maharaja of Kashmir. On July 5, the Syeds brought fifty-four sepoy captives, thirteen of them were taken to Shinkiyari and hanged in the presence of the troops. The rest of the freedom-fighters reached at Kote Gali, from where they went to a place called Nurinor, near the Lalusar Lake. The Syeds again attacked the freedom-fighters, after a brief resistance, the latter surrendered and of one hundred and twenty four

men who were made captive, all except a few were executed. According to native accounts, the Syeds assured amnesty to the freedom-fighters by swearing on the Holy Quran. But when they surrendered, the Syeds betrayed them. The people of the area also did not appreciate the treacherous conduct of the Syeds. Syed Abd al-Jabbar Shah in his work, *Kitab al-Ibrat*, has cited a local song, expressing condemnation of the treachery:¹⁶

The sepoys of Black army (Hindustanis) came in Kaghan. The Syeds ensured them protection on Holy Quran. They had left the false and had adopted the true faith. They had come in the safe valleys but the Syeds betrayed and informed the British about them.

Twenty-three of these freedom-fighters fell into the hands of Maharaja Randhir Singh (r. 1858-1885) of Kashmir. He did not like to lag behind the Syeds of Kaghan in demonstrating his loyalty to the British. He surrendered them to the British, and like their comrades, these were also executed.¹⁷ On August 15, Syed Amir of the family of the known Kunnar Badshahs, came down into the Khyber to incite the Clans to a holy war. He planted his green flag at the village of Gaggri in Peshawar, at the mouth of the Khyber Pass, and sent summons to the Kuki Khel Maliks to leave the British, and join him in a crescentade. The Maliks told the Syed to leave the area. The most he could get from them was five day's hospitality. At the end of the five days, when the Syed showed no signs of leaving, the Kuki Khel Maliks pulled up the pickets of his horses and camels, and even irreverently shut up his flag, and the Syed left the pass. He went to the Muhmand Tribe of Michni, where he was received with open arms, about a fortnight after the uprising of 51st N.I. (August 28), Syed Amir with a body of Muhmands and forty or fifty of the escaped 51st sepoys made a night attack on the fort of Michni.¹⁸ The Muhmands' only aim was the recovery of a fief that they had forfeited some three years ago. Colonel Edwardes started negotiations with the Muhmands, with the results that the latter sent their hostages to Peshawar, packed the Syed off unceremoniously,

and sat down quietly to wait for the return of peace in rest of India.¹⁹

On May 26, Nicholson learnt that Ajun Khan, "a noted outlaw"²⁰ descended from the hills and came down to Prangar. It was believed that he had been invited by a detachment of the 64th, stationed in the fort of Abazai. If he had been joined by the freedom-fighters of the 55th, the whole frontier would have been in a flame. Nevertheless, the force under Colonel Chute and Nicholson had been considerably reinforced, and they were in a position to move against Ajun Khan. The successful disarming of the forces at Peshawar had left an impression on the people that the British were still capable of sustaining themselves. Ajun Khan, therefore, decided not to risk an engagement with them. He soon withdrew into the hills.²¹

The number of executions, which took place in District Peshawar for crimes connected with the War of Independence, is enough to show the brutality with which the British quenched the resistance. This may be classed as follows:²²

People punished at Peshawar	
Type of punishment	No. of people
Blown from guns	47
Shot by musketry	715
Hanged by military authorities	28
Hanged by civil authorities	20
Total	810

In addition to the above, about three hundred sepoys were slain during pursuit while endeavouring to escape.²³

Above-mentioned events especially the executions, punishments and atrocities committed by the British upon the Freedom-fighters and their supporters show that Punjab as well as the Peshawar valley was not calm during the War

of Independence as it is often depicted by the historians. People of this area rose up against the British authorities at various places but could not achieve their desired results due to lack of sources and organization.

References

- ¹ North West Frontier Province (NWFP), which is now renamed as Khyber Pakhtun Khawh, was separated from the Punjab and was created as a new province in 1901. See details of the creation of NWFP and its rationale in J.M. Ewart, and E.B. Howell, *Story of the North West Frontier Province* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2000 rpt., first published 1881), 25-30; Lal Baha, *N. W. F. P. Administration Under British Rule 1901-1919* (Islamabad: National Commission on Historical and Cultural Research, 1978); and Sayed Wiqar Ali Shah, *North-West Frontier Province: History and Politics* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 2007), 10-15.
- ² A Council of War was held on May 13, at the residence of the commander of the Division, General Reed. It was attended by Brigadier Sydney Cotton, who commanded the Peshawar Brigade, Herbert Edwardes, the Commissioner of Peshawar, John Nicholson, the Deputy Commissioner of Peshawar, and Neville Chamberlain, who had been called from Kohat by express message. The Council decided to organize a Moveable Column to operate in any part of the Punjab, where danger may threaten the British power. Chamberlain was raised to the rank of Brigadier-General, and was given the command of the Movable Column. From R. Montgomery to R. Temple, No. 149, March 24, 1858, in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 269-70.
- ³ Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. I, 153; and Homes T. Rice, *A History of the Indian Mutiny*, 5th Edn. (London: MacMillan and Co., 1898), 323.
- ⁴ Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. I, 140-41.
- ⁵ From Edward Thornton to R. Montgomery, No. 80, Camp Gujrat, February 23, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 275.

- ⁶ Ibid., 281.
- ⁷ From Lieutenant-Colonel H. B. Edwardes, Commissioner Peshawar Division, to R. Montgomery, No. 64, Peshawar, March 23, 1858 in Ibid., 149.
- ⁸ For details, see Sultan-i Rome, "Abdul Ghaffur (Akhund) Saidu Baba of Swat: Life, Career and Role", *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, (Karachi), Vol. XL, Part III, July 1992, 299-308; and Sultan-i Rome, "The War of Independence 1857 and Swat", *Proceedings of Two Days International Conference on 150th Anniversary of the The War of Independence 1857*, August 18-19, 2007, Department of History, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, 2008, 127-144.
- ⁹ From Lieutenant-Colonel H.B. Edwardes, Commissioner Peshawar Division, to R. Montgomery, No. 64, Peshawar, March 23, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 160-61.
- ¹⁰ From Lieutenant-Colonel H.B. Edwardes, Commissioner Peshawar Division, to R. Montgomery, No. 64, Peshawar, March 23, 1858 in Ibid., 167; and Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 93n.
- ¹¹ Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 93.
- ¹² Ibid., 35.
- ¹³ Ibid., 113.
- ¹⁴ From R. Montgomery to R. Temple, No. 149, March 24, 1858, in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 286.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ghulam Rasul Mehr, *1857: Pak wa Hind ki Pehli Jang-i-Azadi* (Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1957), 332. (translation mine).
- ¹⁷ From Major J.R. Becher, Deputy Commissioner Hazara, to Lieutenant-Colonel H.B. Edwardes, Commissioner Peshawar Division, Abbotabad, dated January 4, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 120.

- ¹⁸ From R. Montgomery to R. Temple, No. 149, dated March 24, 1858, in *Ibid.*, 285-86.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 286-87; and Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 129.
- ²⁰ The famous British Marxist historian Erik J. Hobsbawm, who is the father of modern bandit studies, coined the term 'social bandit' in 1965 which he elaborated in his work titled *Bandits* in 1969. He argues that the outlaws who live on the margins of rural society and robbed the people were often viewed by the common people as champions of popular resistance. For details, see Erik J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981 rpt. first pub. 1969). In Punjab names of some social bandits such as Dulla Bhatti, Malangi, Jabroo and Nizam Lohar are sung in the folk songs and are respected and appreciated by the people for their resistance against the oppression and cruelty by the rulers or the feudal lords of the area. For details, see Muhammad Hanif Ramay, *Punjab ka Muqaddama* (Lahore: Jang Publishers, 1986); and Mirza, *Resistance Themes in the Punjabi Literature*.
- ²¹ From H.B. Edwardes, to R. Montgomery, No. 64, Peshawar, March 23, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II,, 152-53.
- ²² From Captain H.R. James, Deputy Commissioner Peshawar to Lieutenant-Colonel H.B. Edwardes, Commissioner Peshawar, No. 55, March 1, 1858 in *Ibid.*, Part II, 132.
- ²³ *Ibid.*

