

# THE UPRISING OF 1857 IN SIRSA DISTRICT

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The British rule of half a century from 1803 to 1857 produced a great deal of discontent and disaffection among the people. Their destruction of the village communities. The panchayats and Natural leaders brought social instability in the society: their economic policy of exploitation caused pauperization of the masses; the work of the Christian missionaries. Who were supported by the British Government officials, caused consternation in the mind of the people. The regular visitations of the terrible famines and deadly epidemics had made the life of the people intolerable unhappy and miserable. These and many other factors prepared the ground for revolt. It only required a spark for the bursting forth of a great conflagration. causes of mutiny and failure of mutiny

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The Settlement officer of the British East India company fixed land revenue at more than 50% of the total production without consulting or having consent of the chaudharies in any way. The collection were made in February and September long before the harvest when the present had practically nothing with them in cash or in kind. The collections became, at times, oppressive which impelled the peasant to desert their villages. In the revenue records, a larg number villages during this period are shown as 'Be-Charagh' (without lamps) which shows the plight of the village folk. the peasants were thus compelled to go the sahkass and the money lenders to borrow money to pay their land revenue. The money lenders charged the exorbitant rate of interest and exploited the borrowers and at times deprived them of their holdings. The popular panchayats were divested of judicial powers and the Birtish courts started administering justice which was foreign, costly and time-consuming. Like the villagers, the urbanites who were engaged in professions of trade, craft, industry, service and labour (mostly of them depending upon agriculture) also became victim of injurious economic policy of the British resulting in scenes of dirty and deserted places in towns. <sup>(2)</sup>

The outbreak of the mutiny at Meerut and the massacre at Delhi on the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 1857 took the Sirsa district completely by surprise till then things had been going on just as usual, and crime was so well suppressed that even cases of cattle-lifting, formally so prevalent, were rare. so soon as the capture of Delhi by the mutineers became known, the banyans and other residents of the town of Sirsa began to leave it and flee for refuge to Bikaner territory, taking their property with them , yet for a time not a single case of robbery occurred. There was then stationed at Sirsa a detachment of cavalry and infantry of the Haryana local Battalion, whose head-quarters were at Hansi in the Hissar district. The authorities had no great confidence in their loyalty, and partly to guard a aganst them, partly to re=assure the people, The customs peons called in and the defense of the town was entrusted to the Bhatti Nawab of Rania, the pensioned descendant of Zabta Khan from whom the country had been taken in 1818. on the 29<sup>th</sup> May the Haryana Bhattlion at Hansi they could lay Hand on. On the following day the detachment at Sirsa received intimation of the occurrence and immediately showed signs of disaffection. the European residents, who had been expecting. This and had received notice of the outbreak at Hansi a few hours before it reached the troops, at once took to flight without any opposition from the sepoys. Captain Robertson the superintendent of Bhattiana with his family went by Dabwali and Bhatinda to Firozpur in number, many of then women and children, started from sohwala under the leadership of Mr. Donald, assistant superintendent , and being joined there by Mr. Bowles custom patrol, reached Rori <sup>(3)</sup> after some trouble from the inhabitants of Thiraj and other villages who threatened them as they passed. At Rori the partly took refuge in the small mud ford, and were compelled by the disaffected attitude of the towns people to shut the gate and stand sentries. They could not procure food from the town and were prevented from getting water from the well outside. But in the darkness of the night, Baba Janki Das, a Fakir of the place, brought them supplies of water and flour and passed them through the aperture under the fort gates. <sup>(4)</sup> The party was thus enabled to hold out until the arrival of some Patiala troops, who escorted them to a place of safety in Patiala territory. They were hospitably treated by the Patiala authorities until the restoration of order enabled them to return to Sirsa. The only Europeans left at Sirsa were captain Hilliard, the officer commanding the Detachment, and his brother in law, Mr. Feel, Assistant patrol. These gentlemen were not is Sirsa, when the other left it. They had gone out with some troops towards Jodhka to suppress some local disturbance, and were brought back to Sirsa by their men. The mutineers refused to obey captain Hillard's orders, but supplied him with money and

allowed him and Mr. Fell to depart unmolested. They were, however, treacherously murdered by the Muhammadan inhabitants of chatryan, a small village beyond Sohuwala. The mutineers when left to themselves, plundered the treasury of some Rs. 8000 but without much other violence marched off to join their comrades at Hansi. <sup>(5)</sup>

The Hindu inhabitants of the town of Sirsa fled in dismay chiefly to Bikaner territory, and the Muhammadan population of the surrounding village rose in masse and began to plunder the town and the neighbouring Hindu villages. The Tahsildar of Sirsa, the revenue Sarishtadar and the Kotwali muharrir were murdered, and the records of the district office were torn and scattered about, but most of them were afterwards recovered and comparatively few of them were altogether destroyed and comparatively few of them were altogether destroyed. The destruction of property was most wanton. Whatever the insurgents were unable to carry away they burned or broke the pieces and for a time the most violent portion of the population had it all its own way. <sup>(6)</sup>

The Bhattis of Sirsa at once took advantage of the subversion of British rule to revert to their old predatory habits and the district was at once plunged into utter anarchy and confusion. <sup>(7)</sup>

This situation did not last for long. After a short while, general van Cortlandt, the deputy Commissioner of Ferozpur, attacked the district on instruction from John Lawrence, the chief commissioner of Punjab. His forces consisted of 670 men and two guns. Captain Robertson acted as a political officer under him. The General started his operation with the parganas of Sirsa where he encountered opposition from Nur sumad Khan, the Nawab of Rania. A pitched battle was fought at Odhan, a small village near Rania on June 17. The Nawab's men fought but the British firearms played a vital role in the contest. As many as 530 of the Nawab's men fell fighting as the victory went to van court land. The Nawab effected his escape but he was caught while passing through the Ludhiana district and condemned to death by hanging at Ferozpur Cantt. <sup>(8)</sup> Nawab's tomb still stand here. <sup>(9)</sup>

On June 18, the British attacked the village of chhatrayan where lieut. Hillard and Mr. Fell were killed. The attack was so sudden that the villagers could neither come out to fight nor run away to save their lives they were massacred and their houses were burnt to ashes. <sup>(10)</sup>

June 19, General van courtlandt seconded by Lieut. G. Pearse of the Madras artillery attacked Khaireka, a village on the Ghaggar, where the people had already got the information of the British onslaught on Chhatrayan. They mobilized themselves to thousands and put up a stiff resistance to the British on the outskirts of the village. The village of Saharana, situated on the left bank of the dry bed of Ghaggar river, also was strongly occupied by the Bhattis. <sup>(11)</sup> Khaireka, like all villages in this part of the region, was very strong, each portion being surrounded by a deep ditch with strong embankment and paving the gateway. General van courtlandt detailed the lieut <sup>(12)</sup> Pearse to the left to prevent the portion of the Bhattis who occupied the village Saharana from reinforcing the villages of Khaireka. Jawahir Singh's troops under lieut. Sadler on the left, two guns under lieut Walcott in the centre, the new levies under captain Bloomfield with Lieut. Hunt as second in command on the right and about twenty irregular horses entertained by the General himself on the extreme right were deployed to face the village of Khaireka. Few irregular horses were kept ready to cut off one of the besieged as and when anyone attempted to escape across the village of Mirpur on the further bank of the Ghaggar. The embankment of both villages taken into possession, though the Bhattis fought bravely but were driven back into the villages. The villages fought from houses to house and fired from every conceivable cover <sup>(13)</sup>.

On the other hand, the British removed the roofs of the houses so as to enable them to get those who were firing from the interior. Lieut Walcott charged from the artillery resulting in the killing of several persons. There was a good deal of hand to hand hard fighting, but after the lapse of about two hours both the villages fell into their possession. <sup>(14)</sup> The nine persons managed to escape over the village embankment towards the villages of Mirpur but were immediately pursued by the irregular cavalry on the right resulting in the death of five persons while four were taken prisoners. About 250 were killed and 18 wounded persons were made prisoners. The loss of the British was slight, with six killed and 33 wounded. The destruction was so immense that the Lombard of all the surrounding villages attended to them and the villages brought water and supplies for the force. The British contingent then entered Sirsa on 20<sup>th</sup> June. <sup>(15)</sup> Sirsa was reached when the Bikaner contingent of 800 men and two guns, loyally sent to our aid by the Raja of Bikaner, marched in as a reinforcement. The civil organization of the district was at once re-established, and in a short time things reverted to their former state.

Meanwhile on June 21<sup>st</sup>, a force of 400 Bikaner horses and two guns, under Lieutenant Pearse, was sent on to garrison Hissar on 8<sup>th</sup> July, after restoring order at Sirsa and leaving.

Mr. Oliver there as superintendent of Bhattiana, General van Cortlandt marched via Fatehabad for Hissar, which he reached on the 17<sup>th</sup>, having halted six days at Fatehabad to receive the submission of revolted panchas. <sup>(16)</sup>

The taking of about twenty days in suppressing this historical movement in Sirsa town and its adjoining villages is an ample proof of what large scale, the masses of this region had put up a stiff resistance to the British. <sup>(17)</sup>

With the uprising the revolution of 1857 many people of Sirsa became martyrs as is clear from the following table 2.

No. of Martyrs upto July 8, 1857 <sup>(18)</sup>



B (a) Amount paid by one Kasim Ali on account of his property being sold with that of the Nawab and afterwards released	Rs. 53-07-02	
b) Amount paid toward the compensation of the property plundered by the Nawab	Rs. 608-00-06	Rs. 661-07-08
c) The whole of this item paid towards the compensation of property plundered by the Nawab	Rs. 833-00-00	Rs. 833-00-00
	Total	Rs. 2108-06-06

(24)

There is a popular legend in the town that the other prisoners were kept within the barbed wire enclosure in the ground presently known as jail ground. were at present the old Bus stand, the post office, the telephone exchange and the nearby houses are located. They were tried and punished. A huge fine was levied on several people. Moreover the proprietary right over the villages viz Odhan, Chhatrayan, Khairekan and Jodhka were abolished.<sup>(25)</sup>

Thereafter, Sirsa along with Hisar, Rohtak district and a part of Jhajjar comprising Hisar Division was included in the Punjab in February 1858<sup>(26)</sup>

The help rendered by the Bikaner ruler, the British Government awarded a khillat and granted Tibbi Pargana containing 41 village from Sirsa District to the Maharaja on April 11, 1861 Risaldar Shamsuddin Khan was killed in an action at Bellali in Haryana during the course of the uprising. The British Government, therefore, honoured his son clamer-ud-khan by granting a sand with a khilat. Similarly Baba Janki Das of Rori saved the lives of 17 Europeans, for which he was granted a cash award or rupees Two thousand and 100 bighas of land in Maufti in perpetuity. He was also made a Darbari and received a chair in the Lieutenant Government Darbar<sup>(27)</sup>.

For rendering service to the British Government by laying a private Camel Dak between Hisar and Sirsa timely information of movement of the uprising. Lala Fateh Chand was granted a seal in the lieut<sup>(28)</sup> Government Darbar. These rewards, considered inadequate as they were, in proportion to the services rendered by Baba Janki Dass and Lala Teha Chand the British Government further granted 1000 acres of land in proprietorship of Fazilka Tehsil to each of Janki Dass and Ram Sukh Das son of Fateh Chand In 1877. The ownership of village Chhatrayan was assigned as a reward to the suthars of village Risaliya<sup>(29)</sup>. The main fighting forces during the uprising had consisted of the lower strata of the society viz. peasants, custom peon, The gun carrier sepoy. The sepoy of Haryana Battalion etc. through sometimes led by the Bhattis, the Mughals etc. The socio-economic change enforced in the traditional and conventional life of this region made them discontented and rise against the British. Thus in district of Sirsa at least it was nothing short of a popular movement.<sup>(30)</sup>

General van Courtland, while re-establishing British hegemony over this region, mercilessly butchered several persons apart from setting many villages on fire razing to the ground. A considerable number of heroic persons of this region were transported to the Anadams besides the death sentence imposed on the Bhatt Chief.

The heroic deeds sufferings and sacrifices made by the patriotic persons of Sirsa and its adjoining area in the historic first war of independence are evidently second to none in the annals of India. 31

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