



## Political Identity Crisis among the Muslims: Emergence of Wahabi Movement in India

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**Abstract:-** Many movements sprang-up in India which were political, social, religious and cultural in nature. There were wider impact of all these movement that wanted to restore Muslims rule in India. Abdul Wahab (of Nejd) started this movement in order to remove tribalism from Arabian world. When it was started by Syed Ahmed Breillvy there were two main centres of *Wahabis*-Patna and Panipat where Muslims youths were recruited for against Sikhs in the first phase and later on, against the British. Syed Ahmed forget matrimonial alliance with tribal leaders residing on the boundary of North-West Frontiers Province. Many campaigns were made against Maharaja Ranjit Singh, ruler of Punjab and the British. Delhi, Thanesar, Ambala, Pehowa and Panipat welcome their centres of recruitment. In 1831, main leader of this movement Syed Ahmed was killed in the battle of Balakot. This movement ultimately failed as it failed to get the help of the Hindus. This movement gave an opportunity to the British create gulf between Hindu and Muslims so that both of these communities could not unite them in future. This movement was basically responsible for the creation of separatist tendencies in Indian society.

**Words:-** Renaissance, Reformation, intellectual expression, socio-cultural transformation, Sunnis, Shias, Pindaris, Gurellia, chief organizer.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century India witnessed a great upheaval in political, social, religious and cultural fields. In the real sense, this period can be termed as a period of renaissance in Indian history when all the regions of India were under the influence of such forces which laid great stress on the overall transformation in all walks of life. The twin movements of the Western World i.e. Renaissance and Reformation broke the old established order, propounded new concepts, theories, ideas, shook papal dominance and heightened the urge to set-up a national standard of faith in Europe.<sup>1</sup> It, undoubtedly, gave birth to 'new theological doctrines' which immensely facilitated the growth of secular state.<sup>2</sup>

As already stated that the period of late half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the period of socio-cultural-religious awakening and the emergence of 'new spirit' in all walks of life.<sup>3</sup> These movements which emerged in India were regional in nature but had more or less identical character as their great stress was on the socio-religious- cultural reforms. Their cardinal motive was to uplift the society suffering from a long period. It would be quite true to say that these movements created multiple intellectual expression of the socio-cultural transformation. All such movements basically emerged on account of the impact of Western ideas and thought. Gradually emerging western educated classes also realized the imperative need of such reforms.<sup>4</sup>

Religion was the focal point of attack from all the corners. As far as the Haryana regions was concerned, many such movements emerged both in the Hindu and Muslim communities. Their major aims were to eradicate the social evils and vices, educate the masses and revive the old religious faiths which had disappeared earlier.<sup>5</sup> The Arya Samaj, Wahabi and Sanatam Dharam movements along with new education, literary and journalistic growth were instrumental in creating awakening in different regions of Haryana in general and Rohtak in particular. An attempt has been made to analyse all these aspects in proper historical perspective in this paper.

One notable exception was the armed rising of the Wahabis who were actively engaged in showing their activism long before the outbreak of the Revolt of 1857. It was indeed as one of the most



significant politico-religious movements which emerged in the early decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century and posed a serious challenge to the British *Raj*. It also denounced the prevalence of religious degeneration in the Muslim community and greatly pleaded the revival of simplicity of faith of the Prophet's Arabia and out rightly denounced "all accretions fo and declensions from the pure Islam".<sup>6</sup> In the beginning, this movement had religious orientation (puritan Islam) in order to abolish the tribalism in Arabia<sup>7</sup> but it soon transformed itself into a religious-political creed. Saiyid Ahmad of Rai Bareilly's (1786 – 1831) main contention behind the movement was to restore the Muslim power in the country. The target of this movement was both the Sikhs in the Punjab and the British in Bengal. Before Saiyid Ahmad, Abdul Aziz son of Shah Waliullah had already held the identical thinking in this regard.<sup>8</sup>

Abdul Wahab of Nejd (1707-87) was the real founder of this movement. But on the other side, Shah Waliullah's religious thinking was quire comprehensive, richer and more liberal with sufi-colour and made no distinction between the *Sunnis* and *Shiahs*. It profoundly believed in the pure Islam which must be re-enacted and regenerated. It was his contention that the Muslim society that lost the past glory must revive its power.<sup>9</sup>

If political situation is analysed, it can fairly be said that Sikh power in the Punjab and British in the Bengal had emerged. This movement had to fight against the internal decay and abuses prevalent in the society and resist and even fight against 'infidel rulers'. The leader of this movement in India was Saiyid Ahmad who had challenged Maharaja Ranjit, Sikh rulers of Punjab, and the British *Raj* later.<sup>10</sup>

Saiyid Ahmad, the founder of the Wahabi movement, was a man of humble origin and was a soldier in the service of Amir Khan, the Pindari, who became later on the ruler of Tonk (Rajasthan). He started preaching the doctrines of religious reforms during 1820-21 as was being done by the sect of Wahabis in Arabia. It is generally believed that he was greatly influenced by the Wahabi leader, Waliullah, in Arabia. He made strenuous efforts to revive the old values in his community through the means of threefold activities, "the exalation of the word of God, the revival of the spirit of faith in word and deed, and the practice of holy war."<sup>11</sup> During his visit to number of towns and cities, his activities were greatly appreciated. Before starting the *Jehad* or holy war, he went to Mecca in 1822. He returned back to India in 1824 and was eages to have "a system by which they (his followers) affected one of the greatest revivals known to Indian History, and which has kept alive the spirit of revolt against the British rule during fifty years."<sup>12</sup>

His stay at Patna on his way to Calcutta, he was greatly welcomed by the people and on whose urge he deemed it necessary to found a regular organization. In order to give wider base to his movement, he appointed four *Khalifas* (spiritual vice-regents) – Vilayat Ali, his brother, Inayat Ali, Shah Muhammad Hussain and Farhat Hussain. All these religious leaders were men of multiple qualities as William Wilson Hunder, an ICS officer, has stated, "much of their teaching was faultless and it has been given to them to stir-up thousands of their countrymen to a purer and a truer conception of the Almighty."<sup>13</sup>

Two important events i.e. the death of Ranjit Singh and the first Anglo-Sikh War (1845-46) made the British master of the Punjab. Now the movement soon started assuming a political and military character against the colonial masters. The British created the Special Police Department to operate against them and by the armed expeditions on the Frontier. Between 1850 and 1863 around twenty expeditions were sent out consisting of 60,000 troops against the *Wahabis*.<sup>14</sup> When the military operations failed, the campaign of police action, followed by judicial prosecutions, was speeded up.<sup>15</sup>

In this campaign, 114 military personnel were killed and many officers wounded. *Wahabis* took another British picket in which British General was wounded. It became a terrible situation for the British and more troops were needed. General Havock alongwith 9000 soldiers took over the command. He defeated the *Wahabis* at Laloo and Bonair hills. The British with diplomatic tactics broke the alliance



between the tribal groups and the *Wahabis*. The British army burnt down a large area of Maluka village and its surrounding areas.<sup>16</sup>

Saiyid was unhappy at the turn of events which took place in Calcutta and how trading Company had occupied a large part of India for their economic benefits. So he had fully realized that it was a group of 'British traders' who posed a main threat to India's independence and an all-out effort was greatly needed to drive them out. He wanted to seek the help of the Indian rulers in his endeavor as he explicitly wrote that the time had come when unfriendly foreigners of a distant land who have become masters of the country sent out of India.<sup>17</sup> He wrote many such pamphlets in which he urged upon them to unite as one body and waged a holy war against them for the conquest of India. He knew it well that both pen and sword were necessary for his crusade. He showed eagerness to train his followers in the use of arms and ammunition. For this, he distributed military kit to each of his soliders and held military parade regularly. He chose North-West Frontier Province hilly areas where many tribal communities efficient in gurellia warfare tactics had already been residing. He alongwith the Patna group of Maulvis visited in order to enlist support of the tribes in their crusade against the Sikh rule in Punjab.<sup>18</sup>

Now the question arises : why did he want to overthrow the Sikh rule in the Punjab? He called the Sikh rulers as oppressors' who had butchered thousands of Muslims and forbade them to prayer from mosques and the killing of cows.' He was confident for capturing Peshawar and minting coins in his own name. But no cordiality could take place between his followers and Pathan's followers of the tribal areas ultimately resulting into mass killing of his followers by the Pathans. Consequently, Peshawar was recaptured by the Sikhs and their leader, Saiyid Ahmad, was himself killed in the battle of Balakot in 1831.<sup>19</sup> Thus the death of Saiyid Ahmad was, however, a great blow to the *Wahabi* movement but the Patna leaders did not loose heart and kept the movement alive in a more vigorous way for few more years. Vilayat Ali who wanted to keep the morale high of his followers declared that Saiyed Ahmad was not killed but had only disappeared and would appear again at the proper time to lead the movement again for the victory.<sup>20</sup>

Now the colonial government thought immediately to strike at the root of the movement which was assisted by men and money from different centres. Correspondence and other documents were seized and trials began at Ambala in which many leaders were sentenced to death and others for life imprisonment. During these state-trials, a number of centres working against the British came to notice. Robert Montgomery, Judicial Commissioner of the Punjab, reported that the Muslims of Patna and Thanesar were in correspondence with 64 Native Infantry near Peshawar and urged it to revolt.<sup>21</sup> It is important to tell here that Haryana region was one of the major centres of their activities. Some of the Muslim *zamindars* also joined it. The important centres of the movement were Delhi, Thanesar, Ambala, Pehowa and Panipat.<sup>22</sup>

The leaders of Haryana who were active in the movement were Maulvi Muhammad Qasim of Panipat, Husaini of Thanesar, Muhammed Jafar of Thanesar and Muhammed Shafi of Ambala, a contractor for the supply of meat to European army in many cantonments such as Ambala, Naushera etc. Muhammed Qasim, the closest associates of Syed Ahmad, went to Sithana, the headquarters of the North-West Frontier Province and worked with the tribal chief, Syed Akbar Shah. Many inspiring letters were exchanged between Syed Akbar Shah Maulvis Wilayat Ali and Inayat Ali, the leaders of the Patna centre. Muhammad Jafar alias Peeroo Khan, who was a disciple of Wilayat Ali of Patna was the incharge of the North-Western tribal region.<sup>23</sup>

It is believed that he was the incharge of all the activities of *Wahabis* in Haryana. The official documents testified that Thanesar was 'one of the main depots' and Jafar as "its Chief Organisers'. Muhammad Jafar belonged to a very poor family and by virtue of tactics, he became a *lambardar* of thanesar and helped the Wahabis against the British. He was the main source of inspiration to the youth



whom British intelligence found out as the network of the organization in 1863-64 with the help of one Ghuzzan Khan, a Pathan police Sergeant at Chowki Panipat, Karnal District.<sup>24</sup> After getting all the informations and their involvement, all were arrested traileed at the office of Commissioner Ambala, Sir, Herbert Edwards in 1864. Inquiry was conducted into the activities of the Wahabis, they were found guilty for waging war against the Crown. Some leaders were sentences to life imprisonment while others sent to the Andaman Islands. After the arrest of Muhammad Jafar, a prominent leader of the movement, virtually met its own doom after 1864. By 1888, it come to an end.<sup>25</sup>

The movement, however, failed but it left its many impacts. It was undoubtedly, the first planned and highly organized movement. Those who betrayed the movement were boycotted by their community. The Hindus kept aloof when the Wahabis directed their movement against the Sikh rulers. But when it became political and turned against the British, the Hindus showed some sympathy for it. In the given situation, it can't be treated as national movement. Only a few Hindus might have shown sympathy towards this movement while majority of the population kept aloof from it as it was purely a revival movement of the Muslims.<sup>26</sup>Dr. Rajendra Prasad who the first President of Indian Republic remarked that the earlier risings of the *Santhals*, the *Mundas* and the Wahabis were not "purely political movements for the freedom of the country."<sup>27</sup> They were occasional and inspired by religious considerations also. It was indeed a big movement of the *Wahabis* after the Revolt of 1857. In the given situation, This movement was basically for the revival of their community which could not succeed to establish the Muslim rule in India against the English and Sikhs as it was not liked by many other communities of India. In the long run, it became also responsible for the separatist tendencies in Indian society and continued to widen gulf between both the communities i.e. Hindus and the Muslims.<sup>28</sup> This movement paved way for a new type of politics which consequently came to be dominated by religious dogmas. It would be true to say that this movement kept alive the desire for freedom among the Muslims who had lost their empire at the hands of the British.<sup>29</sup>

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