CHAPTER VIII

ANTI-BRITISH OUTBREAKS AFTER 1858.

I THE WAHABIS

The early history of the Wahabi movement up to the death of its founder, Saiyid Ahmad of Rai Bareilly (1786-1831), has been discussed above. He deliberately conceived the project of reviving the Muslim rule in India by fighting the infidel rulers, particularly the Sikhs and the English. He fell fighting against the Sikhs in 1831, but left a rich legacy of ideas and organization to his large number of disciples. His fundamental creed was that India being dar-ul-harb (enemy territory), it was incumbent upon the Muslims either to destroy the British power, or to migrate to some other Muslim country. His ultimate object was the liberation of India from the hands of the English and Indian infidels, which was an obligation of all Muslims. For this purpose he wrote to the Nizam of Hyderabad, and even to some Muslim rulers outside India, such as Prince Kamran of Herat and Amir Nasrullah, the King of Bukhara. He also approached the various Pathan tribes on the north-western frontier of India. Although he did not achieve much success, his views spread very rapidly all over North India, and also in Hyderabad, where a brother of the Nizam became an ardent follower of the sect.

Saiyid Ahmad had set up a regular organization. He had appointed a number of Khalifas or spiritual Vice-regents, who not only kept alive the movement after the death of their leader, but even made it more vigorous within a short time. Taking advantage of the political chaos in the Panjab after the death of Ranjit Singh in 1839, the Wahabis established their authority over a large extent of territory along the left bank of the Sindh. But when the British established their authority in the Panjab in 1847, the Wahabis were driven away from the Panjab. Inayet Ali, one of the Patna Khalifas, “made vigorous preparation to carry out his long-cherished design of waging a war against the British. Circular letters were addressed to the Wahabi Khalifas
to incite people to proceed to Mulka Sittana for jihad. Those persons who were not in a position to join in the holy war were recommended to resist passively and refrain from all intercourse with their kafir rulers,—to form as it were a power within Government and totally opposed to it.

"The preachers became active, particularly in Meerut, Bareilly, Delhi and in many districts of Bengal and Bihar. Rebellion was openly preached in Patna, where one of the leaders, Ahmadullah, had assembled 700 armed persons and was prepared to resist any investigations by the Magistrate. The police was said to be in league with the rebels. Sedition was preached among the native troops also.

"Inayet Ali, meanwhile, had been able to enlist the sympathy of Akhund of Swat and Saiyids of Sittana to his cause and made a spirited attack on the pro-British ruler of Amb, Jahandad Khan, who feigned submission but secretly applied for British help. In the encounter with the British (1853), the Wahabis suffered heavy casualties, their rear guard and its leader Karam Ali being cut to pieces. Inayet Ali escaped with great difficulty and henceforward adopted the policy of his brother to make suitable preparation before risking a fight with the trained British soldiers. Regular military training was imparted to the recruits and songs were recited extolling the glories of jihad. An expedition under Mirza Muhammad was successful in capturing the Yusufzai villages of Nawakela and Sheikhjana, but was soon repulsed by the British forces. Inayet Ali next occupied Naringi, a border village within the British territory, but had to retreat under pressure to Chinghai and Bagh. Inayet Ali, with the help of frontier tribesmen, next made a night attack (October, 1857) on Lt. Horne, the Assistant Commissioner at Sheikhjana. The British camp was routed, and the party returned triumphantly with a large amount of booty which was distributed among the soldiers. While Inayet Ali was preparing for another campaign, the rising of 1857 broke out in full fury, and his communication with, and the source of supply from, Patna were cut off."

It is not a little curious that this violently anti-British mili
tant organization should have practically kept aloof from the
great revolutionary movement of 1857. Some Wahabis were sus
pected to have carried on secret intrigues with the mutineers at
Patna, and perhaps some individuals really sympathised with the movement of 1857. But the Wahabis in India as a body, kept aloof from it. It was obvious that the strong military organisation of the Wahabis at Sittana could have rendered great service to the cause of the Mutiny by attacking the British in the north-west, as that would have considerably hampered, if not altogether stopped, the constant flow of men and money from the Panjab to Delhi. The Wahabis actually carried on severe and sustained military operations in this quarter both before and after the Mutiny, but they kept almost quiet during the most eventful period of 1857-8. The only satisfactory explanation seems to be that the Wahabis favoured a purely Islamic movement and did not like to co-operate with the Hindus. This view is supported by the conduct of a number of individual Wahabis who joined mutineers at Delhi. They printed and published a Proclamation, inviting all Mahomedans to arm and fight for their religion. A futwa was also published, declaring that it was the duty of all Mahomedans to make religious war, and that otherwise their families and children would be destroyed and ruined.

A recent writer on the subject, Q. Ahmad, has offered another explanation. He points out that there were some fundamental differences between the Wahabi Movement and the Indian Movement of 1857-8. In the first place, the Movement of 1857 was marked by the absence of a unity of purpose and a well co-ordinated plan of action. "The whole of Northern India was divided into separate theatres of war, each under its own leader.........the struggle was divided into small and often isolated fronts. There was no centralised organisation to co-ordinate the different activities. As against this the Wahabi Movement had a well-organised and efficient internal organisation."

Secondly, "the Wahabi Movement envisaged that the struggle against the English was to be carried on from outside, by a sort of Provisional Government established in a territory outside British India......The Movement of 1857, on the other hand, was essentially an attempt from inside the country to drive out the English by force of arms.""......""The main task of the (Wahabi) centres inside India was the collection of men and materials and their transmission to Frontier."" If the activities of the Indian centres were displayed too openly the Government would have suppressed
them and the Wahabi Movement would have come to an end much earlier than it did and there would have been no Ambeyla campaign in 1863."

Ahmad further points out that though the Wahabis did not join hands with the leaders of the 1857 Movement, their Frontier Party, under Enayet Ali, constantly fought against the English during the period.

This explanation is not incompatible with the suggestion made above regarding the aloofness of the Wahabis from the 1857 Movement, and in a way supports it.

The Sittana camp was a source of chronic anxiety to the British. From 1850 to 1857, the British Government sent no less than "sixteen distinct expeditions aggregating 33,000 regular troops" to destroy the rebels and their allies, but with no great success. "An expedition had to be sent under Sir Sidney Cotton with 5,000 men in 1858 to chastise the rebels, and the Sittana lands were made over to the mountain tribes on condition that they would not allow the ‘fanatics’ to pass through their territory to commit depredations within the British frontier. Maqsud Ali died in 1861, and Abdullah, son of Vilayet Ali, succeeded him as leader of the Wahabis at Sittana. Abdullah vigorously pursued the anti-British campaign, urging the Muhammadans to leave the country and join the forces of Islam for the conquest of India. Ahmadullah, who managed the affairs in India, regularly sent up a large number of recruits and money to the distant Wahabi camp. Several tribes as well as the Akhund of Swat, who governed a population of one lakh, made a common cause with the Wahabis, who recovered their old settlement of Sittana in July, 1863. The Punjab Government in a note recorded its views that ‘these fanatics were no harmless or powerless religionists; that they are a permanent source of danger to our rule in India.’ The British Government sent several expeditions to crush the rebels, the most important of which was under the command of Sir Neville Chamberlain (October, 1863). The British army advanced into the Ambeyla Pass but it could not proceed as far as the Chumla Valley due to the stubborn resistance offered by the Wahabis and their allies. All British efforts to dislodge the rebels from their positions failed, and the British forces were repulsed with heavy casualties. The Wahabis even captured a picket and drove the
British force back with a loss of 114 men, besides officers killed and wounded. Subsequently, the Wahabis took another British picket which could only be retaken after a severe battle in which the British General was wounded. The situation became desperate for the British, and Chamberlain sent down a telegram asking for as many troops as could be spared. At this stage General Garvock took over the command and pushed forward at the head of 9,000 troops; he defeated the rebels near Laloo and again at the foot of the Bonair hills. The confederacy of the tribes was broken through diplomatic tactics which facilitated British advance to the rebel village of Mulka, 35 miles from Sittana, which was burnt down. According to Muslim chronicles, only two houses were actually burnt. Between 1850 and 1863 no less than twenty separate expeditions, aggregating 60,000 regular troops, besides Irregular Auxiliaries and Police, were sent against the Wahabis.

The British Government then decided to strike at the root of the movement by prosecuting a large number of Wahabis in India who had been supplying sinews of war to the camp at Sittana. A number of Muslims were charged with the offence of attempting to wage war against the Queen or aiding and abetting it. There were State trials at Ambala (1864), Patna (1865), Malda (1870) and Rajmahal (1870), and many leading Wahabis were transported for life. In consequence of these trials and other circumstances, the Wahabi movement was thoroughly crushed in India.

The evidence produced in these trials revealed the nature of the Wahabi conspiracy against the British and left no doubt that the movement was much better planned and organized than the outbreak of 1857. With a missionary zeal which extorted admiration even from the hostile British writers, the Khalifas toured all over the country, enrolled followers, and appointed provincial and district agents to recruit men and collect money. A Central Committee was set up to supervise the whole operation, and there were also District Committees and permanent preachers. A wonderful system was evolved for the transmission of new recruits from Bengal to Sittana—a distance of about 2000 miles—without arousing suspicion of the British authorities. There was a regular arrangement for collecting taxes, and the-
money was remitted to Sittana by many clever devices. The uninterrupted steady flow of men and money from the eastern part of India, across its whole breadth to the N.W.F.P., at a time when the British authorities were vigilant in their watch against the Wahabi activities, indicates a highly developed organization to which there is no parallel in the history of the revolutionary movement against the British during the nineteenth century.

To the Wahabis belongs the credit for the first organized attempt on a large scale to drive out the English after they had established their paramountcy in India. The Wahabis are regarded by some as having waged the first national War of Independence of India against the British. But it has certainly no claim to be called national in the sense in which we understand the term today. For it was a struggle for freedom, of the Muslims, and by the Muslims. The basis of the movement was religious rather than political, and its inspiration came from communal and not patriotic sentiments. It may be called the first war of independence in India, but not of India—indeed the Muslims in India, but not of the people of India. For, as shown above, the Wahabis fought for the establishment of dar-ul-Islam i.e. restoring the Muslim sovereignty in India, not for setting up a Government in which all Indians would be treated as free citizens. The object of the founder, as mentioned above, was to liberate India from the English as well as other infidels. No wonder, the Hindus, as a body, kept themselves severely aloof from the long-drawn struggle.

The fraternity of Islam and the historical tradition of Muslim suzerainty over India, within almost living memory, generated among the Indian Muslims a sort of national feeling which was conspicuous by its absence among the Hindus. It was therefore very natural that the national aspirations for freedom should first be awakened in the minds of the Muslims, who had so recently lost the power and prestige of a ruling race, and were reduced to the same rank as those whom they had hitherto regarded as their subjects and inferiors.

It is to be noted that the revolutionary spirit of the Wahabis did not leave any trace behind, and its memory did not inspire any anti-British movement among the Muslims in the twentieth century. So, even if we regard the Wahabi movement as a
national war of independence from the Muslim point of view, it was merely a passing episode in the history of Indian Muslims, and not an early phase of the freedom movement among them.

II. OTHER DISTURBANCES.

Local, communal and even personal grievances, backed by religious frenzy, sometimes led to violent anti-British outbreaks. Such were the Kuka movement in the Panjab, the Birsa movement in Chotanagpur (Bihar), and the Naikda rising in Bombay. These have no real claim to be regarded as struggles for freedom, but there is a growing tendency to take them as such, like the local outbreaks in 1857.

A. THE KUKA MOVEMENT.¹⁰

The Kukas were a religious fraternity among the Sikhs and formed a small minority in the population of the Eastern Punjab with their headquarters in the District of Ludhiana. They were very much opposed to the practice of cow-killing, and as far back as 1794 they carried on a raid against Maler Kotla and terrorised the Afghan ruler of the Province into stopping this practice. They were probably organized into a close religious sect by Bhagat Jawhar Mal, generally known as Sian Sahib, in the forties of the 19th century. Its aim was to purify the Sikh religion by removing the abuses and superstitions that had crept into it, such as caste distinctions, rigours imposed upon widows, and the worship of idols, tombs and ascetics. Sian Sahib and his successor Balak Singh gathered round them a band of followers and fixed their headquarters at Hazro in NWFP.

Ram Singh, who succeeded Balak Singh as the Guru of the sect in 1863, had served in the army of Nao Nihal Singh. According to the British official version Ram Singh recruited a large number of followers, chiefly from the Jats and many lower classes, declared himself to be an incarnation of Guru Govind Singh, and preached the revival of the Khalsa and the overthrow of the English Government. He also asked his followers to boycott Government Service, Government schools, Government Courts of law, postal service and foreign goods. It was even
reported that Ram Singh had been carrying on secret intrigues with the Maharaja of Nepal, and that a Kuka regiment was organized in Jammu in 1870 with the help of the Maharaja. The Kukas were also believed to have preached their doctrines among the native forces, and enlisted themselves in the forces of native princes. But the truth of all these cannot be established with any degree of certainty.

In any case, there is no adequate evidence to support the view that the Kuka movement ever aimed at the subversion of the British rule. The main activities of the Kukas before 1871 were the destruction of idols and shrines, and the murder of butchers and others whom they suspected of killing kine. The failure of the British Government to enforce the prohibition of cow-slaughter, imposed by the Sikh Government, induced the Kukas to take law in their own hands, and several of them were hanged and transported. These provoked the Kukas to greater frenzy, and in January, 1872, a band of about 500 armed with axes, sticks etc. made sudden raids on Malaund and Kotla, in the course of which they killed 10 men and wounded 17, their own losses being 9 killed and 38 wounded. Sixty-eight Kukas were taken prisoners by the authorities of Patiala and handed over to Mr. Cowan, Deputy Commissioner of Ludhiana. Without even the semblance of a trial, and in defiance of the order of the Commissioner, Cowan executed 49 of the captured men by blowing them from the guns. The rest were tried by the Commissioner and executed on the following day. This ended the Kuka movement. Ram Singh, the leader of the Kukas, was deported to Rangoon and remained there as a State prisoner till his death in 1885.

B. THE BIRSA MOVEMENT.19

The Birsa movement may be regarded as belonging to the same category as the rising of the primitive tribes like the Kols and Santals to which reference has been made above. Shri Birsa of the Munda tribe, who was educated at Chaibassa and acquired some knowledge of English, started a puritan movement among the Mundas in 1895. His disciples grew in large number and looked upon him as a Prophet or incarnation of God. The
British Government scented danger and regarded the movement as aiming at the overthrow of the British Raj and establishment of Munda self-government. So Birsa was arrested while he was asleep, and he, with his fifteen followers, was stealthily removed to Ranchi. They were all sentenced to rigorous imprisonment for two years and a payment of fine. Being released from jail in January, 1898, Birsa renewed his old activities. The hostile attitude of the British Government to his humanitarian campaign of relieving the misery of the masses and securing justice to them, forced Birsa to organize a fighting force by means of effective training in use of bows, arrows and swords. It is said that in secret meetings during night, Birsa exhorted his followers to fight against those who were perpetrating injustice and oppression on them in various ways, with a view to establishing their own government. Either due to such incitements or to other causes, Birsa’s followers made violent demonstrations by burning mission houses and other acts of rowdyism. Finally, on 7 January, 1900, a band of 300 Mundas, armed with bows, arrows, battle-axes, and spears, attacked the Khunti Police Station. The retaliation was swift and terrible. A large number of Mundas, including women and children, and estimated at about 200, were killed, and even some wounded persons were alleged to have been buried alive. Birsa was captured on 3 February, but died of cholera in jail on 2 June, 1900. By a ruthless campaign of terror about 450 followers of Birsa were rounded up and the movement collapsed.

C. THE NIAIKDAS.¹³

In 1858 there was an unsuccessful insurrection of the Naikdas, a very wild forest tribe of Panch Mahals in Bombay, under Rupsingh. Ten years later he joined Joria who had set himself up as an incarnation of God and collected a large following. The two together established a court and began to collect revenue by way of religious gifts, fines, and transit dues. They made armed raids upon Rajgad in the State of Bariya and Jethpur in Chhota Udepur. The Naikda risings were suppressed by a British force.
D. CONTINUATION OF OLDER REVOLTS.

As in the case of Savantvadi, mentioned above, some anti-British outbreaks were legacies from the pre-Mutiny period and were caused by purely local or personal grievances without any religious background. The hill-tribes in Assam, who carried on prolonged hostilities against the British in the first half of the 19th century, continued them in the second half. There were risings of peasants of the Phulaguri area in the Nowgong District in 1861 as a protest against the prohibition of poppy cultivation and prospect of additional taxation. For similar reasons there were violent outbreaks in Jaintia Hills which were of a more serious nature and continued from 1860 to 1863. Hardly less serious were the series of riots in the plains of Assam during 1893-4, caused mainly by the high assessment of land revenue.

Reference has been made above to the rebellion of Surendra Sai and his followers in Sambalpur from 1857 to 1864.

FOOTNOTES

2. PIHC., XXXI. 176-81.
3. HCIP., IX. 890.
4. TB., 271.
5. Ahmad, op. cit., p. 217.
6. Ibid., p. 226.
8. HCIP., IX. 892.
10. The account is based on HCIP., IX. 901-04.
12. The account is based on HCIP., IX. 904-07.
13. The account is based on HCIP., IX. 907-08.
15. Landmarks of the Freedom Struggle in Assam, by K. N. Dutt, pp. 25-34.
16. See p. 175; also cf. HCIP., IX. 144, 950-51.