

Majlis-i-Ahrar and their Resistance in the Colonial Punjab

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Abstract- Punjab's political history is incomplete without discussing the role of Majlis-i-Ahrar, which during the third decade of twentieth century was the main force behind charging the people especially Muslims of Punjab. Ahrars not only proved Colonial Government wrong but also gave them tough time by offering resistance against their various policies. Therefore, this paper tries to examine the vibrant and rigorous role of a religious party which started its activism in Punjab in late twenties of twentieth century. It argues that on one side Colonial Government was fully confident that province of Punjab was in their full support but on the other side there was great stir created by Ahrars against them. This research is also an effort to explain that how Majlis-i-Ahrar earned their place in Punjab by adopting policy of agitation. The sensational and radical affairs that Majlis-i-Ahrar characterized during 1930s in Punjab are the key points of this history.

Key Words- Punjab, British, Resistance, Kashmir Agitation, Kapurthala, Unionists, Shaheed Ganj Mosque, SGPC, Sikh Muslim Conflict

I. INTRODUCTION

The decade of 1930s witnessed outburst of few new movements and political parties such as the non-cooperation movement, Majlis-e-Ahrar movement, Khaksar movement etc. These developments further magnified the already strong levels of passive and active resistance of various Punjabi communities against the British administration. Main focus of this research is the resistive politics of Majlis-i-Ahrar and this study has highlighted that, one-way or the other, Majlis-i-Ahrar tried to express their strong disapproval of the British rule in India. There was also a visible change in the attitude and policy of this movement regarding the Colonial rule in India and they also tried to exert pressure on the British for the rights of Muslims of Colonial India. Though MAI's activities were spread in all over India but colonial Punjab was their main center point. Meanwhile in the earlier part of the decade of 1930s numerous innovative ideologies, native religious and political organizations sprang up also in Indian politics, which were generally Punjab based. Among them Ahrar was the most rigorous and organized party which not only awaken nationalism in Indian Muslims but also offered strong resistance against certain policies of British government. This paper is an effort to investigate the origin and vibrant and resistive role of Majlis Ahrar in Punjab during colonial rule.

The Ahrar as a Movement took its start by establishing All India Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam in Punjab in 1929^[1] where its president was Habib-ur-Rehman while Mazhar Ali and Daud Ghazanavi were its main administrators. Other important persons were Chaudhary Afzal Haq, Janbaz Mirza, Shorish Kashmiri and Taj-

ud-Din. This party had some objectives like betterment of Muslims economically and socially Muslims. Moreover its core interest was to create political understanding.

Ahrar was the most vocal party in the politics of Colonial Punjab in the end of third and in start of fourth period of twentieth century therefore the time period of 1930s specifically is the chief importance of this work. It is said that Ahrars were influenced by Khilafat politics^[2] nonetheless they embraced a changed pathway since 1929 to forward.^[3] This organization came up with the idea of social equality therefore the main audience of this party was middle and lower middle sections of society.

Reason of its foundation and Philosophy

Khilafat movement's main supporters were scholars of Deoband school of thought but they were not alone who were interested in the progress of this movement.^[4] Many Muslims likes Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali were also the part of it and everyone worked for the development of this movement but on different issues soon a separation was emerged which led towards making of different Muslim political groups among which Ahrars were one.^[5] For example Shorish Kashmiri said that, There is no second opinion that Ahrars were the result of the Caliphate, ideology of journals lik *Al-Hilal* and *Zamindar*. In actual this was the merger of an attitude against British, affection for Islam, trustworthiness, willpower to fetch revolution and desire for piloting a fight for the sake of God.^[6]

The aforementioned combination of trust and governmental affairs meant that this party ultimately would evolve towards revolutionary leas. For instance, since its background was revolutionary, the Ahrar was in close association with Congress

however their political understanding was different. Syed Ata Ullah Shah Bokhari who was founding member of Ahrars stated that Moulana Abul Kalam persuaded him to make an organization like this, though Azad not ever requested others to become members of it.^[7] This is also a fact that after the abolishing of Caliphate the Khilafat movement was also weakened. Moreover the mishandling of the funds also left Muslims trustless because now they had no trust over Muslim leaders.^[8] Maulana Abdul Qadir Qasuri and some other Punjabi frontrunners who were in close association of Abul Kalam, organized it.^[9] Maulana Muhammad Ali was not happy with this association and clearly conveyed his suspicions but Central Khilafat Group itself was at odds and divided into two sections:

1. One was the Muslim Nationalist Party which was under the administration of Muhammad Alam, although in very brief period it was merged with Congress,
2. Another was Majlis-i-Ahrar-i-Islam under the command of Zafar Ali Khan, Syed Ata-ullah Bokhari, Maulana Mazhar Ali Azhar, Khawja Abdul Rehman, and Chaudhri Afzal Haq.

Its essential objective was the devotion and passion of its followers and their soulfulness. Mostly big scholarly names were associated with it who through their oratory skills could cast a spell over the spectators and listeners through their speeches.^[10]

Working of this Organization

This party entered into the Indian politics with the aim of guiding Muslims in political and religious affairs. The party's flag was decided to be red and a white crescent with a star in its center. They wore red attire to remember those Khudai Khidmatgars who were killed on 23 April, 1930 in a fight with the Colonial Government in Qisa Khawani Bazar, Peshawar. According to Dr. Samina Awan at first Ahrar were also known as surkhposh (those who wear red dress as uniform) however that tag befitted better for the Khudai Khidmatgars.^[11]

If one goes through the pages of Colonial India's History it becomes clear that Majlis-i-Ahrar-Islam's (MAI) strategy was to gather Muslim community by promoting the passionate and delicate problems consequently; no chance was ever missed in taking part any in any issue whether it was political religious or social. Main followers of Ahrars were the Sunni Muslims mainly those, residing in Punjab. The politics of Ahrars can be seen by analysing their role first as constitutional agitators then by explaining that how they took benefit from the religious matters of Punjab in case of Kashmir and Kapurthala.

Activism in Legal and Constitutional Matters

As India's politics was entering into the most crucial phase of constitutionalism, a lot of such political issues came up, bringing up the rise of Ahrar party. This party boycotted the Simon Commission in 1927-28,^[12] and subsequently rejected its ratifications. Ahrars were not satisfied with the proposal of this Commission and electorate rights for Muslims. Other major political parties of India were also boycotting this commission and Congress was also among them. This joint understanding brought Ahrar near to Congress. Moreover during that time Congress in its annual session announced for complete independence from British and asked for sawaraj, this announcement also made Ahrar to tie up with Congress for further political activism. When Congress announced for Civil Disobedience of 1930, Ahrar also participated in it with full zeal and zest. In November 1930^[13], Round Table Conference was organized to chalk out any plan for Indian

solution but the Majlis-i-Ahrar, was in agreement National Congress's policy of non-cooperation therefore they did not join it. When second Round Table Conference was called in 1931, Congress decided to participate in it, which made Ahrar furious and they parted their ways with it.^[14]

British Prime Minister, Ramsay Macdonald affirmed a legal Act for Indian people and it was a plan to make this Award as the part of Indian Act of 1935. However this announcement made Majlis-i-Ahrar unhappy as in their opinion the announced award had least Muslim majority so they protested and took out many political processions in several metropolises of the region, in favour of their demands. Ghaffar Ghaznavi, Tajuddin Ludhianavi, and Ihsan Ahmad were the main Ahrar elites to use a communal discourse in their speeches.^[15] With the passage of time their approach became more critical for all British, Hindu, and Sikhs.^[16] Since September to December 1932 a lot of conferences and protests were made to criticize the Communal Award. Though Ahrar held many civic conferences in whole of the Punjab but Amritsar was center point of their actions. Meanwhile the Muslim League Board of All India Muslim League accepted the said bill, in Delhi on 2 April 1934, same was done by the Majlis at the session of an All-India Communal Award in Dacca, on 24 March 1935 because no other plan could be worked out.

Ahrar's Role in Kashmir Province

Ahrars has done so much for the betterment of the Kashmiri Muslims against the harsh policies of Maharajah Hari Singh but their role is not recognized well in the pages of history. A very few works^[17] are worth mentioning who have fully recognized the contribution and role of Ahrar party in the politics of colonial Punjab. As Ayesha Jalal is also in the favour of the view that this resistance is most significant for the Ahrar Party as it provided it with a chance to raise its level in the mainstream politics of British Punjab.^[18] Kashmir, during the rule of Dogra Raja (1847-1948) was like hell for the Muslims because of number of reasons. Butchering a cow, a sacred animal for Hindus, was a serious crime which had imprisonment of seven years.^[19] Muslims had to pay a special tax for the butchering of animals for the sacrifice during Eid days and if a Hindu had to convert to Islam he had to lay off all his possessions. Even economic resources were also not equal as Such the Maharaja was in believe that by these policies he could control the public and any insurrection caused by the people of valley.^[20]

The miseries of Muslims of Kashmir were continuously being highlighted by Muslim press in the years of 1930s. The economic depression and political frustration among Kashmiri Muslims opened an outlet of resistance against the ruler of Kashmir. Meanwhile incident of blasphemy against Quran made Muslims infuriated. Situation in Srinagar was more critical as it was the Muslim majority populated area. On 21 June people gathered in Jamia Mosque where this act was condemned and a Muslim Abdul Qadeer, who was on vocations in Srinagar, made a seditious speech against the administration on which he was arrested by the authorities.^[21] The arrest of Abdul Qadeer was a volcano which erupted for violence because he was highlighting and criticizing the cruel policies of Maharaja's rule. Due to his agitated speeches and continues condemning he was trailed in Srinagar on 6 July 1931. On the day of his trail Muslims of

Kashmir gathered and protested in front of the courts of Srinagar where police opened fire and killed many marchers.^[22]

The situation in Kashmir was now more sensitive as these protests converted into communal tensions because of the severity of the issue. Muslim protesters made Hindu trader community to shut down their shops and other businesses and upon their refusal they destroyed their shops. Consequently, Muslims in hundreds as well as prominent leaders, Chaudhri Ghulam Abbass and Shiekh Abdullah were arrested, keeping tensions high in Kashmir.^[23] In July's last week in 1931 all-important Muslims gathered at Simla and announced for the formation of All India Kashmir Committee.^[24] This organization passed a resolution that the rights of Kashmiri Muslims would be safeguarded through nonviolent and legal means. It also demanded for a special enquiry commission and on 14 August, 1931 Kashmir Day was celebrated in solidarity with the Kashmiris. Afzal Haq, Ata ullah Shah Bokhari and others criticized ruler of Kashmir as well as his policies and became active and demanded an enquiry over the plight of Kashmiri Muslims. After getting no response, they entered into Kashmir forcefully and also persuaded other volunteers for entering in Kashmir for the sake of other Muslims. Mazhar Ali Azhar and other comrades spoke gigantic conventions at Gujranwala city and at various regions of Sialkot that alarmed the British Government. Here role of Kashmiri Prime Minister Hari Kishan Kaul, is very important who sensed the matter wisely and permitted the protesters to enter in the Kashmir because he clearly did not want to the situation to become more grave. Here too the protestors demanded for such Government who could be beneficial for both Muslims and Hindus but failing on all these fronts, they started a kind of civil disobedience and asked their followers to move in Kashmir from Sialkot from 6 October 1931 ahead.

This announcement led a stream of follower kept flowing and there number was so massive that only from Punjab, 45,000 volunteers entered in Kashmir and paralysed the state machinery.^[25] The conflict out busted in Punjab so recklessly that Government opened new prisons to facilitate the convicts.^[26] This disobedience was so much strong that the ruler of the State had to change its Prime Minister Hari Kishan with Colonel E.J.D. Colvin, who was now new Prime Minister. His approval was taken from Indian Political Department. Hari Singh, founded a commission under the headship of Sir Bertrand Glancy to control the political turmoil but it could not help to control this agitation. This tension in Kashmir became a solid rock in the political uprising of Ahrar in Punjab as by 11 February 1934, there were almost three legislators in the Judicial Convention of Punjab.^[27]

Kapurthala Problem

Like Kashmir there is quite clear role of Majlis-i-Ahrar in the Kapurthala state as well where the ruler was Sikh but its 57 percent populace was of Muslims. Most of the population was consisting of peasants who had to pay a lot of taxes. Moreover they had to suffer the exploitation of financiers who were Hindus so this situation made them agitated and they started to arrange rallies against Hindu shopkeepers. These financiers and businessmen condemned this and announced for two days strike which proved a golden chance for Muslims as they established their personal shops in the concerned zones. This expansion further deteriorated the relations between Muslims and Hindu class who refused to lend money to Muslims. This newly emerging situation was

immediately responded by Vice President of the Majlis-i-Ahrar named, Chaudhri Abdul Aziz, who formed an organization in 1931 with the name of Zamindara League. It grew very quickly as a number of Ahrar volunteers joined it immediately to support the Muslims of Kapurthala State.

In June, 1932 it was because of the efforts of Ahrars that the Muslims of Bholeth asked for the implementation of reforms regarding Punjab Land Alienation Act, reduced land income and the safety of the non-transferable property of small farmers. The ruler of that time sensed the seriousness and formed a committee but it evolved a little and enhanced more distrust among the people of that area. They local Muslims were even suspected of the activities of Prime Minister of State, Sir Abdul Hameed as they believed that he was in support of Hindu prosperous and business classes. For instance the Secretary of Ahrar, at Hoshiarpur indicated in the Daily Zamindar that "the people of Bholeth are suffering from very critical because the Northern part of the Tehsil where a large community of Muslims is residing has being victimized by the administrative and law controlling persons and their lives are so much pathetic that a lot of them want to leave the vicinity".^[28]

Muslims were quiet perturbed as their demands were not fulfilled by the government of Kapurthala. They felt marginalized as Kapurthala state was clearly trying for the safeguard of Hindu's community's interests by establishing a 6 person committee where only two members were Muslims. This marginalization and distrust gave Ahrar party a political opportunity to take part in that regional problem of the Government. At an Ahrar Meeting inaugurated on 3-4 April 1934, the demands were made for the betterment of Muslim community towards which State responded positively, but it diversified the communal tensions between both communities. On 22 April 1934, in Kapurthala State there was a quarrel among different communities over religious sanctity of these three communities of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh. The route of Muharram procession at Sultanpur had a set way to pass through a lane where an old oak tree was with its overly spreading branches, obstructing the way of procession. Muslims decided to cut some of its branches but for Hindus and Sikhs it was sacred because of its connection with their respective religions so they did not want to cut its any branch. This created communal violence among all the three in which many Muslims were gunshots and almost the number of wounded was thirty three.

The main Committee of Ahrar took notice of it on 2 May and formed an inquiry commission on 27 April 1934 and found state's negligence. They decided to Observe 11 May as the Sultanpur day and meanwhile Administration also issued its discussions on 7 June 1934 and held Inspector General Police, Major Kothewala, responsible for the carnage and sacked him straight away. These steps could not satisfy the Ahrar leadership as they now more confident because of their active role in Kapurthala resistance so they asked for a more strict action. Just as in Kashmir, this party remained successful in establishing its identifications as a strong and resistant party in Kapurthala's political problem which had strong believes in the politics of activism.

Agitation on Masjid Shaheed Ganj

The leaders and workers of this party on no occasion hesitated from wooing their detention, and they never kept themselves away from any act of civil disobedience whenever they

had any chances.^[29] Like any other issue, this party adopted the same tactics over the matter of Shaheed Ganj Mosque. This place of prayer was constructed by a Mughal kitchen in-charge near Railway Station of Lahore during the seventeenth century. This mosque remained fully operational during the reign of Mughals and there was a police station too adjacent to it. When Mughals had to deal with Sikh rebels they used to keep rebels in the said police station. During those days a rebel named, Taru Singh was imprisoned to death in that police station. His monument was built on his place of execution and named it as Shahid Ganj, and then named it a Gurudwara later.^[30] When Sikhs captured Lahore during late eighteenth century, they started to use the mosque as a part of Gurudwara and this plan remained continue during the period of British rule in Punjab.

Promulgation of the Gurudwara Act in 1925 changed the whole situation and became a cause in sparking up the issue of Shahid Ganj between Muslims and Sikhs. This act annulled the role of Mahants on the properties of Gurudwaras and others associated with it. When Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) got its access regarding the Gurudwaras including Shahid Ganj, the Sikhs attached with its properties like mosques and shops approached the committee and asked for favour that these properties were their personal properties including the mosque. In this state of affairs Muslim organization s Anjuman-i-Islamia (Islamic Association) of Punjab, claimed its right legally over the praying place and other attached property. Nonetheless, the tribunal lay off the claims of both parties and gave the buildings to the committee but this decision was challenged by the Sikh tenants but this verdict was asserted by High Court and the authority of concerned bloc was given to SGPC (Lahore) in March 1935.

Once SGPC got the possession of the building they started to renovate it extensively.^[31] During construction one of the builders fell and died, Muslim community perceived his death as the result of sin of destroying the building of mosque. Resultantly the site became the visit place for Muslims as well as for Sikhs but this situation also increased the risks of clashes between both communities. Sometimes they started to protest and sometimes they used to come just to watch. The Deputy Commissioner asked the both communities to scatter but no one paid attention and tensions remained unease.^[32]

Both Commissioner and Governor Emerson made the Muslim notables believe that they will keep in their mind about the sentiments of Muslims relating to mosque demolition issue but they did nothing and on 8 July, 1935 the mosque was leveled to the earth. This made Muslims furious and the agitation in Punjab was increased.^[33] Ahrar leadership was quite at first but then they formed a council with the name of Anjuman-i Tahaffuz-i Masjid Shahid Ganj.^[34] Soon with the formation of this committee tensions were heightened fast in Punjab.

On July 14, 1935 again a communal gathering at Mochi Gate was organized where Zafar Ali Khan from Zamindar, was the chief orator who not only criticized British Government but also Ahrar leadership as well for being silent over the said issue. Nonetheless Ahrars had formed an organization on 12 July, 1935 but they opted to not to take part in the agitation directly and actively.^[35] Zafar Ali Khan made a party with the name of the Majlis Ittehad-i Millat started to enroll blue shirt helpers to start civil disobedience movement but immediately Colonial Government responded and

banned public processions and also strict the press censorship. The Ahrars at first were enthusiastic regarding the mosque conflict but later they considered it as a plot against them. Unionist Party and Ahrars were the strong rivals of each other and Ahrar leadership thought that Unionist Party wanted to drag them in the conflict against Colonial Government so they could not participate in the coming elections of 1937.^[36]

The mosque issue could not resolve but Ahrars remained at distance because joining the agitation could place their leadership in imprisons which would lead the Unionist Party towards victory in the 1937 elections. Meanwhile their active campaign against the Qadian group not only made them the prominent party of Punjab but also earned them rivalry with Unionist popularity. Again when Colonial Government started its recruitment campaign in Punjab for Second World War, Ahrar leadership resisted it and launched protests against it but they could not get popularity like before and after partition declined gradually.

Conclusion

The failure of the Khilafat, the Non Cooperation Movement of 1919 and Congress's and Muslim League's strategies gave motivation to numerous politically non-involved public groups fragments to form new religio-political societies for political struggle. Ahrar organization formed in the third decade of twentieth century was one of them. It created a stir in the constitutional, political, and social affairs of India especially in Punjab. Having background of Khilafat movement, they were skilled in politics of offering resistance. They worked for uplifting of Muslims of India on various issues and tried to support their rights against the British Government. They also supported Muslims of Punjab against the cruel policies of Princely states of Kapurthala and Kashmir. Their resistance and criticism against the policies of these states made them popular among the Muslims of Punjab. Ahrar also tried to cash their popularity over the issue of Shaheed Ganj mosque but the due to the coming elections of 1937 they opted for not taking law in their hands and tried to resolve the matter legally. Muslims of Punjab were expecting strong reaction from their side so this policy of playing safe decreases the popularity of Ahrars in Punjab. Though it remained for short time period but it blow severely the understanding that province of Punjab was pro-British.

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