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HISTORY OF MEWAT – AN OUTLINE

(This paper was prepared for a presentation made by Shahabuddin Khan Meo, Founder Trustee and Chairman of the Munshi Qamaruddin Khan Foundation for Education & Research, on September 21, 2011 at the Department of History, Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan.)

There are about two million Meos living in Pakistan mainly in Punjab and Sindh. There are a small number of them living in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (NWFP) and Balochistan as well. Meo is a migrant community from an area known as 'Mewat' in India. During the medieval period, Meos were known as Mewatis and they were the predominant population of Mewat.

Mewat is an area located in India within the triangle formed by Delhi, Agra and Jaipur. Mewat is a cultural region rather than an administrative unit. Beginning approximately 64 km south-west of Delhi, its fluctuating boundaries are now estimated to extend 112 kilometers north to south and 80 kilometers west to east between latitude of 26 and 30 degrees north and longitude of 76 degrees east. Not many people know that it was a mountainous area with jungles large enough where rulers of Delhi used to go for tiger hunting.

Prior to 1526 the area of Mewat was a political entity, when Babar divided the area into three parts and distributed them to three different persons, one of them being his son Humayun. In 1947, at the time of the partition of India, the area of Mewat lay in three political units — two princely states, Bharatpur and Alwar of Rajputana, and the district of Gurgaon in the province of Punjab.

So far no book has been written which contains an authentic history of Mewat. Meos, who were predominantly resident of Mewat are either stigmatized by Persian and English historians or highly glorified by Urdu (Meo) writers.

I personally first came across the mention of this area, according to which Balban (Ulugh Khan, who was a general in the army of Sultan Nasir-ud-Din Mahmood, and later became Sultan with the name of Ghyas-ud-Din Balban) raided Mewat in 1260 to punish the “*Mewatis*”, who were labeled as plunderers and murderers. The word used for Meos at that time was *Mewatis* and they were then Hindus. It was during the period of Feroze Shah Tughlaq that they converted to Islam. However this was a brief mention of Mewat in one of the books of History of India that I read in my High School.

Details of Balban’s campaign are given in ‘*Tabaqat-e-Nasiri*’ written by Minhaj-ud-din Juzjani, according to which it was twice that Mewat was raided, first in January 1259 (657 H.), and again in December 1259 (658 H.). The second one was more brutal and lasted for twenty days in which “the inhabitants who were thieves, robbers, and highwaymen were all slain. A silver *tanka* was offered for every head, and two *tankas* for every man brought in alive.” Thousands were killed and, “Two hundred and fifty of the chiefs of the rebels were captured”. They were brought to Delhi and presented to the Sultan. Later they were mercilessly killed¹.

It seems that once more Balban, after taking over as Sultan around 1265, attacked Mewat towards the end of the first year of his reign². It is stated that, “In this campaign one hundred thousand of royal army³ were slain by the *Miwattis*⁴ and the Sultan with his sword delivered many servants of God from the assaults and violence of the enemy. From this time city was delivered from the attacks of *Miwattis*.”

It is further stated that, “After the Sultan had thus routed out the *Miwattis*, and cleared away the jungle in the neighbourhood of the city, he gave the towns and country within

the Doab to some distinguished chiefs, with directions to lay waste and destroy the villages of marauders, to slay the men, to make prisoners of the women and children, to clear away the jungle, and to suppress all lawless proceedings. The noblemen set about the work with strong forces, and they soon put down the daring of the rebels. They scoured the jungles and drove out the rebels and the *ryots* were brought into submission and obedience.”

Balban, in fact, tried to eliminate the whole tribe, because they were known as robbers and bandits who frequently attacked the royal armies and looted royal treasures passing close to that area. However, no one on this planet has been able to eliminate a whole tribe or people whether he be Changez Khan, Balban or Hitler. Shamim Afif Siddiqui, an Indian historian, says in the review of *Resisting Regimes*⁵ authored by Dr. Shail Mayaram:

“Whether contemporary historians agree with her or not, Mayaram nonetheless succeeds in driving home a point; neither can a well planned act of violence exterminate a people nor can anyone wipeout the identity of a community.”

It took about two centuries for the Meos to rise again to a significant population when, during the period of Feroze Shah Tughlaq, their head Bahadur Nahar, later Nahar Khan (earlier Nahar Singh and still earlier Sumer Pal or Sambar Pal) was acknowledged as a lawful ruler of the area of Mewat. He and his generations ruled over the area until 1526 when, as mentioned above, the political entity of Mewat was brought to an end by the Mughal conqueror of India, Zaheer-ud-Din Babar.

The first war for control over India between the armies of Babar and Ibrahim Khan Lodhi, who was then ruling India, was fought at Panipat. In this war, Hasan Khan Mewati, who was then ruler of Mewat, also fought along with Ibrahim Lodhi. Babar came out as conqueror. Tahir Khan, son of Hasan Khan Mewati was captured and Babar took him along to Agra. Hasan

Khan presented himself in the court of Babar with gifts and requested the release of his son. Babar released his son, according to himself for encouraging Hasan Khan and with the expectations that he would side with him in the future.

Just at that time Rana Sangram Singh (commonly known as Rana Sanga), a Rajput ruler, advanced towards Agra with an army of about one hundred thousands to fight with Babar. The war was fought at a place called Khanva near Bayana. In this war, Hasan Khan Mewati also fought along with Rana Sanga. This war proved to be more difficult than the one in Panipat. At the end of the first day, it appeared that Babar may not win this war, according to him, due to a rumour spread by his astrologist that the stars were not in favour of Babar. This is the time when Babar resolved to give up drinking if God granted him victory. (It appears God listened to his prayer.) Next day, Babar won the war. Rana Sanga was injured and fled towards the jungles and Hasan Khan was killed. This is the point at which Babar, annoyed with Hasan Khan Mewati and considering him to be a traitor, disintegrated Mewat and divided it into parts⁶, and the identity of the area lost its name 'Mewat'.

End of the rule of Meos over the area, however, did not end their struggle for autonomy. Hashim Amir Ali, in his book, *The Meo of Mewat*⁷, mentions: "With Hasan Khan of Mewat went the last brave, powerful and intelligent rule of this community." Later, he mentions, "But the Meos appear to have remained Meos. Even a hundred years later, under the leadership of Ikram Khan, they gave trouble to Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughals⁸."

Their resistance did not end with the fall of Mughal Empire. It continued throughout the British rule, not only against the Center, but also against the princely rulers of Indian Rajputana. Account of their struggle and encounters with the British government and the princely rulers are given in detail in the two books authored by Shail Mayaram. So much so that Mayaram states in her second book. *Against History Against State*⁹:

“The postcolonial state continues with Mughal and Rajput practice strategically dividing it into administrative units and electoral constituencies. The fear of a united Mewati power survives even after their forced diaspora following genocide against them in the aftermath of the partition of India.”

Shail Mayaram has documented all historical events about Meos and Mewat since the twelfth century in her two books. The objective of the scholarship offered here at the Quaid-e-Azam University is to write a thesis to compile the events with historical perspective, which could later be printed in a book form.

Shail Mayaram, in her book, *Against History Against State*¹⁰, mentions, “Historical detail for the period before the establishment of the Sultanate in the thirteenth century is *somewhat hazy*.” For the purpose of this scholarship, we would not attempt to explore the period earlier than Balban in order to find out the origin and the nomenclature of Meos or Mewat. Because, I feel, that it would be a complex study and research which is not possible to be completed within the time available under this scholarship. We would only try to document the history from the period of Balban to the partition of Indian in 1947, for which enough details and references are available in the two books authored by Shail Mayaram.

Notes and References

- 1 The History of India as Told by its own Historians in the Posthumous Papers of the Late Sir H.M. Eliot. John Dowson, (8 volumes, 1867-77), reprinted Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1976, Vol. 2, pp 380-83.
- 2 Ibid, Vol. 3, pp 103-105.
- 3 Firishta says, with more probability, that he put a hundred thousand men (of the enemy) to the sword.
- 4 The printed text and the MSS, say "Miwans," but Firishta has "Miwattis," and he is no doubt correct. The copyists must have misunderstood the name, or possibly they have modified the orthography.
- 5 *Resisting Regime: Myth, Memory and Shaping of a Muslim Identity*, Oxford University Press, 1997
- 6 For details, see *Tuzk-e-Babari* (Urdu translation by Rashid Akhtar Nadvi), Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2004, pp. 186-236.
- 7 *The Meos of Mewat*: Hashim Amir Ali, Delhi, 1970, page 27.
- 8 Ibid., page 28
- 9 *Against History, Against State: Counterperspectives from the Margins*, Shail Mayaram, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, page 31.
- 10 Ibid., page 19.