
Gugera Movement 1857: Nature, Extent and Significance

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The Gugera uprising was the most widespread and serious rising within the borders of the Punjab and for a while threatened the British fortunes in that quarter. It quickly engulfed the important stations of Kamalia, Pindi Sheikh Musa, Syedwala, Harrappa, Chichawatni, Tulumba, Serai Sidhu, Shorkot, Jamlera, Sahooka, Kaboola and Pakpattan. The numerical strength of the freedom-fighters can be noted by report of R.C. Temple, secretary to Chief Commissioner, according to which an official of the postal department informed the Chief Commissioner that the numbers of the freedom fighters amounted to exactly 125000 men. Elphinstone the officiating Deputy Commissioner of Gugera confirmed it by saying that all the native accounts agreed that the whole country as far as Tulumba, in the Multan District was in open insurrection. While the Census Report of 1855 tells us that the population of Gugera District was 3,08,020 and of the Multan division was 9,71,175. By this one can well imagine what a large number of people rose against the British in this area. Popularity of this movement can also be judged by this that the Muslim women were also sighted in action, "moving along the tops of the houses with their skirts stretched out, so as to cover the matchlock-men as they crept about from point to point.

The significance of Gugera uprising can be seen in the words of Cave-Browne who maintained that the crisis during these days of September until the fall of Delhi was even greater and of more consequences for British survival than that marking the months of May and June.

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Gugera, now a town in District Okara in the Punjab Province, was a district of Multan Division in 1857. It was given the status of district by the British East India Company Government in 1852, three years after the annexation of the Punjab. It was situated on the south bank of the River Ravi and upon the old military road from Lahore to Multan, 40 kilometers to the North-East of the present station Sahiwal¹

At Gugera, local tribes, Kharrals, Wuttoos, Fatianas, Qureshis, Kathias, Wehniwals Mardanas, Tarhanas and Baghelas under the leadership of Ahmad Khan Kharral rose up against the British on September 17, 1857 but before this three important events had been happened which set the mind of the tribes to rise. First, on July 8, 1857, at the village of Lukhoke in the Pakpattan tehsil the people of Joiya tribe refused to pay the land revenue to the British authorities. The British attacked the village, and a large number of people were fined and imprisoned in the Gugera jail.² Secondly, on July 26, 1857 the prisoners in the Gugera jail made a desperate attempt to affect their escape during the night. In this attempt, 17 prisoners were shot in the fray, 33 wounded and 18 succeeded to escape.³ According to native accounts, about 145 prisoners were killed and it is also said that more than 100 British or native soldiers were also killed in this encounter.⁴ Another important event was that at the end of May, 1857 news of the uprising of the Hurriana Light Infantry and of the Irregular Cavalry stationed there reached Gugera. The British authorities of District Gugera decided to send a force there.⁵ According to

folklore, at this occasion, Berkley, the Extra Assistant Commissioner of Gugera, asked Ahmad Khan Kharral to provide men and horses for this campaign but Kharral refused to do so. Here is a beautiful dialogue between Berkley and Ahmad Khan in this song.⁶

The Englishman Berkley says, Provide me mares, Rai Ahmad and I will secure a citation for you from London.
Rai Ahmad says, "no one in his life ever shares wives, land and mares with others".

On the night of September 16, 1857, Sarfraz Khan Kharral of Kamalia, a rival of Ahmad Khan Kharral informed N.W. Elphinstone officiating Deputy Commissioner Gugera about the intended uprising of the tribes.⁷ As soon as Elphinstone got this information, he immediately sent Berkley with 20 horsemen to arrest Ahmad Khan Kharral but he failed to do so. Berkley burnt the town of Jhamra and returned with 20 prisoners and 700 cattle.⁸ On 20th September Elphinstone dispatched Lieutenant Chichester and Lieutenant Mitchel to attack the freedom-fighters who might have been assembled at Pindi Sheikh Musa and its suburbs. They found no freedom-fighters there, burnt the town of Pindi Shiekh Musa and returned.⁹ On 21st September, the British attacked Ahmad Khan Kharral and his companions at a place Gishkowree. In this battle 14 or 15 horsemen of the British were killed but they succeeded to martyr Ahmad Khan Kharral and Sarung, the Chief of the Bege Ke Kharrals.¹⁰ Although British had to face severe loss in this expedition but it was an irreparable disaster to the freedom-fighters.

The martyrdom of Ahmad Khan Kharral created a feeling of revenge in the people of whole area. On 22nd September, the very next day of martyrdom of Ahmad Khan Kharral, the men of Fatiana, Tarhana and Mardana tribes led by their chiefs Bahawal, Salabat and Walidad respectively assesmbled and attacked Berkley and his men. Berkley was killed along with 50 men of his

detachment. According to British records as well as native accounts, the first fatal blow was struck by Murad Fatiana.¹¹

In October, the British gathered their all forces at Gugera. Reinforcements reached there from Lahore, Multan, Gujranwala, Jhang and Leiah. Commissioner Lahore A.A. Roberts and Commissioner Multan Major G.W. Hamilton arrived Gugera with their allies. Among them prominent were Makhdoom Shah Mahmud Qureshi of Multan¹², Mustafa Khan Khakwani¹³, Sadik Muhammad Khan Badozai¹⁴, the Chiefs of the Lungrial clan, Bahawal and Machhia¹⁵, Sarfraz Khan Kharral of Kamalia¹⁶, Ziadat Khan Daha of Khanewal and his son¹⁷, Dhara Sing Nakai of Gugera¹⁸, Khair-ud-Din Khan of Kasur¹⁹, Bawa Khem Singh Bedi of Rawalpindi²⁰, Sardar Nihal Singh of Rawalpindi²¹, Jeevay Khan Araeen of Village Akbar²² (now in district Sahiwal) and Bawa Hardit Singh of Rawalpindi.²³

On the contrary, the freedom-fighters could not get help from anywhere. Delhi had been re-captured by the British on September 20, 1857. As the leaders of the freedom-fighters were fully conscious that their warfare could not equal that of the government, therefore, they requested Nawab of Bahawalpur to come forward but he refused to help them.²⁴ Only due to their enthusiasm, bravery and power of faith they succeeded to continue their struggle even till January 1858. At last some of them surrendered and the Gugera uprising was crushed by the British. According to native accounts hundreds were blown from canons and a number of people were imprisoned for life. A countless number of people were sent to Andaman Islands popularly known as "Kala Pani" or Black Water.²⁵ Among them who were sent to Andaman or Kala Pani, prominent were Bahawal Fatiana, Murad Fatiana, Mokha Wehniwal, Majhi Bushaira Kharral, Lal son of Ghazi Kathia, Muhammad Yar Mardana, Rehmat Khan, Kada Mardana, Walidad Mardana, Chief of his tribe and Nadir Shah Qureshi of Pindi Sheikh Musa.

The Gugera Movement was the most widespread and serious uprising within the borders of the Punjab, and for a while, threatened the foundation of the British rule in the region. It started from Jhamra and Gugera and quickly engulfed the important stations of Kamalia, Pindi Sheikh Musa, Saiyyidwala, Harappa, Chichawatni, Tulumba, Serai Sidhu, Shorkot, Jamlaira, Sahuka, Kabula and Pakpattan.²⁶ The strength of the freedom-fighters can be estimated from the report of R.C. Temple, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner, according to which a Muslim official of the postal department informed the Chief Commissioner that the numbers of the freedom-fighters amounted to exactly 1,25,000 men.²⁷ The statement of Elphinstone, the Officiating Deputy Commissioner of Gugera, also confirms the strength of the freedom-fighters that the whole country as far as Tulumba, in District Multan, was in open insurrection.²⁸ While the Census Report of 1855 tells us that the population of Gugera District was 3,08,020 and of the Multan division was 9,71,175.²⁹ By this one can imagine that what a large number of people rose against the British in this area. The popularity of this Movement can be judged by the fact that even the Muslim women were also sighted in action, "moving along the tops of the houses with their skirts stretched out, so as to cover the matchlockmen as they crept about from point to point".³⁰ Reinforcements for the British were rushed from all possible quarters, i.e. Jhang, Leiah, and Gujranwala and repeatedly from Lahore and Multan. Still the freedom-fighters did not give up, and even the fall of Delhi failed to discourage them. Twice the freedom-fighters succeeded in winning over the control of the town of Kamalia, but the British again occupied it.

Leaders of the Gugera Movement were in close contact with the freedom-fighters of Delhi and Hansi, and on September 17, 1857, when the fierce and heroic defence of Delhi reached its peak, the Movement began.³¹ This critical situation is described by Cave-Browne, who testifies the deep anxiety among the British officers in Lahore after their communication with Multan had been cut off, and news came in that "the whole of the Gugera

District was in arms".³² John Lawrence was at Lahore at that time. He fully appreciated the momentousness of the danger. In the words of Cave-Browne, "[t]hough he had risked everything for Delhi, and Delhi had now fallen, all might still be lost if that spirit of unrest which was astir throughout the Punjab were once allowed to gain head".³³

The Provincial Government deliberately underrated the Gugera Movement by asserting that it was not dangerous but difficult to be suppressed.³⁴ On the contrary, Cave-Browne maintained that the crisis during these days of September until the fall of Delhi was even greater and of more consequences for the British survival than that marking the months of May and June.³⁵

Ahmad Khan Kharral, the mastermind behind this Movement, was reported to have been in constant communication with the freedom-fighters of Delhi and Hansi, and with the Mughal Emperor himself. He publically renounced his allegiance to the British and claimed to fight under the orders of Emperor Bahadur Shah.³⁶ Other Muslim Chiefs who participated in the Gugera Movement included several leaders, like Nadir Shah Qureshi of Pindi Sheikh Musa, Walidad of Mardana Clan, Salabat of Tarhana Clan, Mokha of Vehniwal Clan, Bahlak Wuttoo of Wuttoo Clan, Mehr Bahawal and Mehr Murad of Fatiana Clan, and Muhamand Khan of Kathia Clan.

The British authors have tried to devalue this movement, and defame its leaders by calling them cattle-lifters and thieves.³⁷ However, the historical record does not verify this assertion. Even the opinion of some British officers contradicts it. Major F.C. Marsden, Deputy Commissioner Gugera, reported, "When I reached Gugera, I found it had been attacked by the powerful clan of Kharral under their old chief, Ahmad Khan, a wealthy, determined old patriarch".³⁸ According to Montgomery Gazetteer, Ahmad Khan Kharral was an exceptional leader with qualities of head and heart. He was courageous and bold and it was he who had roused the people.³⁹ Even after a century and a half,

he is remembered as a hero in the folklore and folk songs. A folk song or *dhola* testifies the above-mentioned statement of Marsden as such: He was chief of all clans. He had been resisting previous government. Ranjit Singh avoided confrontation with him and used to bypass his areas.⁴⁰

Similarly, about another leader of the Gugera Movement, Mehr Bahawal Fatiana, Cave-Browne wrote that he was the greatest man among them, the bravest and most influential.⁴¹ Another leader, Murad Fatiana has been tributed in a song in this way: There is no chief like Murad, although a number of people wear white dress. The people of Ravi remember him and wish that if once Murad, son of Dalail, could come back.⁴²

The people of the Punjab still have great respect and devotion for the leaders of resistance, and consider them as their hero. The objective of the leaders of the Gugera Movement can be clearly assessed from the letters written by these leaders. For instance, Bahawal Fatiana, Salabat Tarhana and Sarung Vehniwal wrote a letter to Woordie-Major Mir Barkat Ali of 1st Irregular Cavalry, requesting him to leave the British army and help them against the British. They offered him the leadership of their resistance movement, and they were ready to afford all expenses for the feeding all the men and horses, which he might bring along.⁴³ They wanted to get his support for the independence of their country from the yoke of the British.

Similarly, some leaders of the Gugera Movement named Muhamand Kathia, Nathu Kathia, Murad Kathia, Amir Kathia and Lal Kathia, Bahawal Fatiana and Salabat Tarhana wrote a letter to the Nawab of Bahawalpur, in which they wrote:⁴⁴

Whereas intelligence was received to the effect that the King of Delhi was making war against the English Government for the sake of establishing Muslim regime under the Divine command, on hearing this happy news, all the *Zamindars* of this country rose up for struggle

against the English authorities of the Multan Division. Accordingly, we are fighting against them upto the present time...if you are firm in the religion of Islam, we have about 18000 fighting men ready to serve wherever your highness may require them...we beg that, for the sake of God and his Prophet, your highness may lend your hand and assist us, for which you will be rewarded at the Day of Judgement.

If we analyze these letters impartially, the correct picture of the designs of the leaders of the Gugera Movement becomes clear. They were not thieves or cattle-lifters, rather they were rich and influential people of their areas, and the people had great love and respect for them. For example the Superintendent of Gugera jail had great devotion for Ahmad Khan, and allowed him to visit the jail inspite of strict restrictions by the British authorities.⁴⁵ Similarly, the guard refused to give boats to Berkeley, Extra Assistant Commissioner, since Ahmad Khan had ordered him not to do so, and he considered Ahmad Khan as the king of the area.⁴⁶

The above-mentioned letter of the freedom-fighters also reveals that they tried to invoke religious symbols for mustering the support of the Nawab of Bahawalpur. For them, revival of Islam meant restoration of political authority of the Muslims. In other words, for them revival or protection of Islam was not possible without establishing Muslim political authority. It was a pre-requisite for their desired protection of Islam. So they were ready to sacrifice their lives as well as their property for this purpose. In the end we may conclude that the leaders of the Gugera Movement were neither thieves nor cattle-lifters, they were popular leaders of the people in their respective areas in the Punjab, who led the resistance movement at various places in the province. They were neither rulers, nor sepoys, but were freedom-fighters. They had no personal grievances against the British. Neither their *jagirs* were confiscated, nor their pensions stopped. They fought for a noble cause⁴⁷ which was to eliminate foreign rule from their homeland.

Notes and References

- 1 *Montgomery District Gazetteer 1898-99* (Lahore: Punjab Government Printing Press, 1899), 45; On the opening of the railway, Gugera was abandoned as a civil station and the headquarters of the district transferred to the village of Sahiwal. In 1865, in order to pay compliment to Sir Robert Montgomery, the new station received the name of Montgomery. In 1966, it was renamed as Sahiwal. *District Gazetteer of Montgomery 1933*, 5; and Salahuddin Malik, "1857 Gugera Uprising", *Islamic Studies*, XVI, 2 (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic Research, 1977), 65-95.
- 2 *Punjab Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part-II (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1911), 43.
- 3 *Punjab Administration Report 1856-57 & 1857-58* (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1859), 18.
- 4 A.D. Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi* (Lahore: Pakistan Punjabi Adabi Board, 1985), 58.
- 5 *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part-II, 42.
- 6 Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 130.
- 7 *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part-II, 45.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 45-47.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 49; Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857* (Edinburgh and London: 1858), 208.
- 11 Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 208; *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part-II, 50-51; and Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 160 and 162.
- 12 Lepel Henry Griffin, *Punjab Chiefs* (Lahore: The Civil and the Military Gazette Press, 1909), 306-7
- 13 *Ibid.*, 311.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 322.
- 15 Griffin, *Punjab Chiefs*, Vol. II, 322; and *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII Part II, 23.
- 16 Griffin, *Punjab Chiefs*, Vol. I, 231.

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- 17 *Multan District Gazetteer, 1923-24* (Lahore: Government Printing Press, 1925), 17.
 - 18 Griffin, *Punjab Chiefs*, Vol. I, 234-35.
 - 19 *Ibid.*, 235.
 - 20 *Ibid.*, Vol. II, 230-31.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 242-45.
 - 22 Saeed Bhutta, Ahmed Khan Kharral, *Pancham* (Lahore: Jan-Feb, 2005), 65; *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 47; and Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 46.
 - 23 Griffin, *Punjab Chiefs*, Vol. II, 250.
 - 24 *Mutiny Correspondence*, Vol. II, Part II (Lahore: Government of the Punjab, 1911), 211.
 - 25 *Proceedings of the Judicial Department*, August 7, 1858, Nos. 16-19; and November 13, 1858, Nos. 60-61.
 - 26 Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 200-223; Montgomery and Temple, *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, Vol. IV (Lahore: Government Printing Press, 1859), 74; Lord Roberts, *Forty-one Years in India*, Vol. I (London: Richard Bentley, 1897), 214-15; and Mcleod Innes, *The Sepoy Revolt: A Critical Narrative* (London: A.D. Innes and Co., 1897), 138 and 192.
 - 27 From R. Temple, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner for the Punjab, to G.F. Edmonstone, Secretary to the Government of India, No. 75-322 (political), May 25, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 358-59.
 - 28 *Ibid.*, 51.
 - 29 *Punjab Census Report 1855* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1856), 9.
 - 30 Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 204-8; and Montgomery and Temple, *Selections from the Public Correspondence*, 77.
 - 31 From N.W. Elphinstone to G.W. Hamilton, January 30, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 46; and From A. Brandreth, officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner Punjab, to G.F. Edmonstone, the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign

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- Department, No.58, Lahore, September 1857; From G.F. Edmonstone, Secretary to the Government of India, to John Lawrence, Chief Commissioner Punjab, Foreign Department, No. 4089, Fort William, October 2, 1857; and From E.H. Paske, officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner Punjab, to G.F. Edmonstone, Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 71, Lahore, October 16, 1857 in *Mutiny Correspondence*, Vol. VII, Part II, 59, 83 and 179.
- 32 Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 210.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 From A. Brandreth, Officiating Secretary to the Chief Commissioner Punjab, to G.F. Edmonstone, the Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department, No. 63, Lahore, October 3, 1857, in *Mutiny Correspondence*, Vol. VII, Part II, 85.
- 35 Cave-Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 227.
- 36 *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 45-47.
- 37 Ibid., 214; and see also Andrew J. Major, "State and Criminal Tribes in Colonial Punjab: Surveillance, Control and Reclamation of the Dangerous Classes", *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 3 (1999), 657-88.
- 38 From F.C. Marsden to G.W. Hamilton, January 31, 1858 in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 57.
- 39 *Montgomery District Gazetteer 1933*, 14.
- 40 Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 117. (translation mine).
- 41 Cave- Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 214.
- 42 Ejaz, *Kal Bulendi*, 163. (translation mine).
- 43 Cave- Browne, *The Punjab and Delhi in 1857*, Vol. II, 215-16. The letter bears no date.
- 44 Translation of a petition from Muhamand, Nathu, Murad, Amir, and Lal Kathias, Bahawal Fatiana and Salabat Tarhana, *zamindars* of District Gugera, to the Nawab of Bahawalpur in *Mutiny Correspondence*, Vol. VII, Part II, 211. The letter of freedom-fighters bears no date but the reply of this letter by Nawab of Bahawalpur bears the date of October 19, 1857.

45 From N.W. Elphinstone to G.W. Hamilton, January 30, 1858
in *Mutiny Reports*, Vol. VIII, Part II, 42-43.

46 *Ibid.*, 46.