

## Kunwar Singh

The revolt that spread began at Meerut on May 10, 1857 very soon spread to large parts of Northern India, including Bihar.

There were three developments in Bihar during July 1857.

At Patna there was an uprising led by Pir Ali and his associates; the mutiny at Danapur (Dinapur); and the assumption of leadership of the revolt in the region by Kunwar Singh. On July 25 three regiments stationed at the major cantonment of Danapur on the outskirts of Patna rebelled. Most of the troops crossed the Son river into Shahabad, where they joined the rebels under Kunwar Singh who were then ~~beset~~ besieging a small European community at Arrah.

At the time of the revolt the Bihar province (or, rather, Patna division) of the Bengal presidency consisted of the following six districts: Patna, Bihar, Saran, Shahabad, Tirhut and Champaran. Bihar had enjoyed considerable importance in the trading activities of the European companies since the 17<sup>th</sup> Cent. Under the EIC a system of forced cultivation of Indigo, and exploitation of the cultivators by European indigo planters and indigenous Zamindars, was imposed in the countryside.

The first major incident in Bihar during the revolt was the Patna uprising of July 3, with Pir Ali at its forefront. On this date the Deputy Opium Agent of the Patna Opium Agency, Dr Lyell, was killed. This was an attack on a major source of colonial revenue. Pir Ali was charged with Lyell's murder, convicted & hanged.

After the rebellion in Patna, sipahis of three of the regiments in Danapur mutinied on 25 July, 1857. This may be said to mark the beginning of a widespread revolt in Bihar, which lasted more than a year. On 26 July, the troops reached Shahabad in an effort to organise themselves under the leadership of the

Octogenarian Kunwar Singh, Raja of Jajpur Jagdishpur, who had already launched a movement against the British.

Kunwar Singh gathered a large no. of followers, who included his brothers Amas Singh and Ritnasain Singh; his nephews Nishan Singh and Jai Krishna Singh; Thakur Dayal Singh and Bisheswar Singh. It may be mentioned here that whereas a section of the landlords of Bihar took part in the revolt, the bulk of the big landlords remained loyal to the colonial govt. and helped it in crushing the movement.

Nevertheless, the uprising was fairly widespread in the region, and did have strong popular support in several areas.

Kunwar Singh was generally looked upon as a 'natural' leader by most rebels in Bihar. When some Bihar rebels were being tried in Sept 1857, one of them declared, "the supremacy of the English and the company is at an end, and it is now Kunwar Singh's reign". Thus, the rebels of Danapur, Chhotanagpur, Manbhum, Singhbhum and Palamanu wanted to carry on the struggle together under his common leadership. Many of them sought to help Kunwar Singh by sending their forces to join Kunwar Singh, moved from place to place fighting the British with the help of local chiefs and the common people.

However, at a critical juncture the British was saved by Major Eyre, who defeated Kunwar Singh's forces at Bibiganj on 3 August. But this did not mark the end of Kunwar Singh's struggle. He shifted out of Bihar, moving to Mirzapur, Rewa, Banda, Lucknow and Kanpur.

Kunwar Singh adopted the unique method of attacking the weakest positions of the English, while keeping his men mobilised for any eventuality. This perhaps explains why the rebellion could be sustained for such a long time. Avoiding fixed positions, Kunwar Singh moved around extensively in areas like Rewa, Banda and Kalpi, along with his

— Comrade-in-arms Nishan Singh. He took the part in the battle of Kanpur, Lucknow and then Azamgash. By April 23, 1858, Kunwar Singh had ~~had~~ was back at Jagdishpur. He had lost an arm, but his determination to fight the English has not weakened. On 22nd and 23rd April being injured he fought bravely with British Army armed with sword, single handedly drove away the British Army, brought down the Union Jack from Jagdishpur Fort and hoisted his flag. This joy was celebrated by organising victory ceremony on 23rd April, 1858 but Veer Kunwar Singh died on 26th April 1858.

Sir Anto Travellion has observed it was a consoling factor that Veer Kunwar Singh was 80 yrs old at the time of revolution of 1857. Had he been a youth at that time the English might have left India in 1857 itself.

The fact of the matter is that this democracy of ours is the blessing of the brave martyrs like Kunwar Singh and others who had lit the flame of Freedom of India.

