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Peer Ali Khan: An Unsung Comrade of the Indian Freedom Movement

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ABSTRACT

The British political authority in India was, for the first time, challenged through a monumental and wide-ranging resistance of all Indians, irrespective of caste, colour, religion, region, etc, in the revolt of 1857. Though it was unsuccessful overall, it was successful for two reasons in particular: first, it gave the colonial administration an unexpected and profound shock. Second, it was a binding force of all the communities and produced many ideal heroes of the freedom movement aftermath. However, nationalist historiography has largely privileged a limited set of leaders and regions, resulting in the marginalisation of several significant regional revolutionaries. Among these overlooked revolutionaries is Peer Ali Khan, who has played a seminal role during the Patna uprising. There are so many heroes of the freedom movements who have either been forgotten or are lesser known because they left unexplored or largely unheard of. This paper demonstrates that Peer Ali Khan, a significant yet overlooked leader of the 1857 Revolt, deserves greater recognition for his contributions. He led the Patna uprising, refused British mercy, and was executed without a trial. Peer Ali Khan's actions showed true resistance. By analytically documenting his contribution, this paper seeks to restore Peer Ali Khan to the mainstream narratives of India's freedom struggle.

Keywords: Oppression, Comrade, Chief rebel, Unsung hero, Martyrdom

INTRODUCTION

(شہیدوں کی چیتاؤں پر لگیں گے، ہر برس میلے

وطن پر مرنے والوں کا یہی باقی نشان ہوگا)

(Festivals will be held every year on the cheetahs of the martyrs.

This will be the remaining mark of those who died for the country.)

The War of 1857 was the first major upsurge in the country through which the British political authority was challenged, which the British never thought about. It has been referred to by a variety of names in historical writings. British Historians call it the Sepoy Mutiny(1).

Indian Historians call it the Great Rebellion or the revolt of 1857. V.D. Savarkar called it the First War of Indian Independence. It has been called by K. M. Panikar a National Revolution. Benjamin Disraeli, leader of the Conservative Party in England, called it a National Mutiny. It was one of the most popular events led by Indians against British colonialism(2).

¹ British historians are of the opinion that the revolt of 1857 was just a mutiny led by some sepoy recruited, administered and controlled by the Britishers and hence they called it Sepoy Mutiny.

² Colonialism is an ideology that talks about the domination of one country by the other for economic interest. The main aim of colonial power is the extraction of economic benefit from the colony.



Many outbreaks happened because of anger among Indians. The 1857 revolution started on May 10 in Meerut and soon spread to Kanpur, Bareilly, Jhansi, Delhi, Awadh and other areas. The revolt had many causes, such as social, economic, political, religious, and military reasons. A common feeling among Indians was anger and dislike for the British. The revolt began when Indian soldiers refused to obey orders because the British ignored their customs. Over time, it became a mass movement and was called India's first struggle for freedom. Many people gave their lives for the country that is still remembered in the annals of history. The 1857 revolution was the first major Indian attempt at freedom. Thousands joined the fight to end British rule. But the lack of an organised plan helped the British stop the revolt. One major change was the end of the East India Company's rule and the start of direct rule by the British crown. Even after this, the freedom movement went on in different ways, finally bringing India's independence in 1947.

The heroic saga of such heroes is still present in history, but there were some other heroes of that battle, about whom not much is written. A few years back, such a valiant soldier from the forgotten stories of history was found in Patna, the capital city of Bihar, of which only a few people have heard about. The hero of this freedom movement was named Shaheed⁽³⁾ Pir Ali Khan, who played a proactive role during the Patna uprising against the British. Mahatma Gandhi, Chandrasekhar Azad, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, Sukh Dev, Raj Guru, Kanwar Singh, Mangal Pandey and Peer Ali Khan. Here, from Mahatma Gandhi to Mangal Pandey, everyone is aware of but may be shocked to hear the name of Peer Ali Khan, who is not mentioned in history. His sacrifice for the country, his heroic story, is lost somewhere in the pages of time. He was a brave, relentless and daring soldier of the revolt of 1857 who gave a jolt to the British administration in Patna, Bihar.

PEER ALI KHAN AND HIS REVOLUTIONARY CONTRIBUTIONS

"You can hang us, but you cannot kill our ideal. If I die, my blood will give birth to millions of brave people who will one day end your oppression"

(Shaheed Peer Ali Khan)

Peer Ali Khan was among the earliest and most resolute revolutionaries of the Indian Freedom Movement in Eastern India, particularly in Patna. He played a decisive and foundational role in shaping the spirit of resistance against British colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century. Colonial administrative records identify him as a bookbinder by profession, a position that provided him access to printed and handwritten material, enabling him to circulate anti-colonial proclamations and revolutionary

pamphlets among the urban artisans, traders and religious communities. Born around 1812 in Muhammadpur,¹ Uttar Pradesh, Peer Ali migrated to Patna, where he led a humble life as a bookseller. This profession later became a powerful cover for his political activism.

Growing up as a self-reliant person who valued his autonomy, he established a bookstore in the bustling centre of Patna, the current capital of Bihar. It is believed that he specialised in selling exquisite handwritten and calligraphic books and literature. Over time, his modest shop gradually evolved into a gathering place for revolutionaries to devise plans and strategies against British oppression. After connecting with these revolutionaries, he began to stock and sell revolutionary literature from across the country. Eventually, Pir Ali dedicated his life to contributing to the movement to free the nation from British rule. Consequently, Peer Ali's shop became a hub for those who shared a similar disdain for the British East India Company's occupying forces. Many Indians serving in the British Army at the Danapur camp also met him at his shop and formed close friendships with Peer Ali Khan. His strong connections with the local soldiers of Danapur, particularly with Waris Ali, enabled him to establish an anti-British soldier community. The common people of Patna and the surrounding areas supported Peer Ali for his animosity and acts against the British administration. His role in the freedom movement is evident through a series of revolutionary interventions.

Firstly, his contribution to the Indian freedom movement is primarily manifested in his establishment of a clandestine communication network that facilitated the coordination between the civilian and military rebels in Bihar during the 1857 uprising. This became the first revolutionary communication network in Patna's Maulabag area, which evolved into an intellectual hub where nationalist ideas were exchanged, coded messages circulated, and strategic meetings of anti-colonial rebels were held. He was a binding force in Patna that united traders, rebels, youths and revolutionary commanders.

Secondly, Peer Ali Khan emerged as a pivotal organiser of ideological resistance by employing intellectual activism and print culture as a strategic tool for revolutionary mobilisations. Revolt in Bihar, forging a crucial network of freedom fighters, distributing seditious literature, sheltering rebels, and coordinating communication routes between revolutionaries in Patna, Lucknow, Benares, Danapur and Arrah. While most narratives treat the 1857

³ Shaheed is an Arabic term used to denote martyr in Islam. In other words, a person who sacrifices his life for the sake of Allah while fighting against oppression is called a Shaheed. Here, Shaheed means a person who sacrificed his life for the country.



uprising as a predominantly military revolt, Peer Ali's role demonstrated the existence of a sophisticated civilian-led underground movement guided by ideological conviction and strategic clarity. His influence extended beyond logistical support—he infused the movement with strong nationalist sentiment, spreading anti-British consciousness among common people and mobilising them through his persuasive communication, religious leadership and deep credibility within the local community.

Thirdly, Peer Ali Khan was a strategic leader in the 1857 revolt in Bihar. He coordinated the activities and ensured steady communications between rebel commanders and the plan of action. British archival testimonies, including those of William Tayler, then Commissioner of Patna, identifies him as “the most dangerous rebel in Bihar”² reveal the extent of British anxiety regarding Peer Ali's organizational capabilities; Tayler describes him as the “Head of the Wahabi rebels”³, and identifies his ‘bookshop as “the most dangerous Centre of seditious activity in Bihar,”³ a recognition that ironically testifies to his importance in the rebellion. Peer Ali Khan's leadership peaked during the events of July 1857 when he masterminded operations aimed at destabilising British control in Patna, including plans for coordinated attacks and the dissemination of revolutionary messages.

Fourthly, his unyielding courage under torture and interrogation shows his spirit of patriotism and creed in the motherland. His arrest on 4 July 1857 marked one of the most decisive British counter-measures in curbing the spread of rebellion in eastern India. Even under brutal torture, Peer Ali remained steadfast and refused to reveal the names of fellow revolutionaries, exemplifying extraordinary devotion to freedom. His unwavering support and courage towards India enraged the British authorities, who saw in him not just a rebel but an ideological threat capable of inspiring mass resistance.

In the history of Bihar, Peer Ali Khan is a hero of the 1857 revolt whose contribution to the war of independence is equally important to the other freedom fighters. During the revolution of 1857, he played a big role in creating and organising the spirit of freedom and struggle among the people by roaming around in Bihar. He used to get guidance from the revolutionary Azimullah Khan of Delhi. William Taylor, the chief British official and the Commissioner of Patna at that writes, “Peer Ali was a native of Lucknow, but have resided for many years in Patna; he was by trade, a Book-seller, and I strongly suspect that he may have originally established himself here, for the express purpose of carrying on the intrigues which issued in this abortive out-break”⁽⁴⁾ Taylor further added, “Peer Ali himself was a model of the desperate and determined fanatic; repulsive in appearance, with a brutal

and sullen countenance, he was calm, self-possessed, and almost dignified, in language and demeanor”⁴.

Some narratives indicate Peer Ali organised regular gatherings of his friends, admirers, and followers. Additionally, he and his associates endeavoured to inform the local populace about the British Raj's oppression and exploitation of ordinary people. Raji Ahmed, the President of Patna Gandhi Museum, notes that during the 1857 revolution, Pir Ali Khan began travelling to raise awareness and encourage participation in the freedom struggle. Together with his friend Waris Ali, an officer in the British Army in Danapur, they urged the locals to resist the infidels. They sparked a sense of patriotism among the people of Bihar, regardless of their religion, and incited them against the oppressive forces. He believed that dying was preferable to living in servitude. Over time, he connected with revolutionaries in Delhi and other places. Azimullah Khan, a prominent revolutionary from Delhi, served as his inspiration, and he adhered to his advice and guidance.

PEER ALI KHAN, THE MAN BEHIND THE PATNA UPRISING

The Patna uprising of 1857 constituted a significant civilian-led resistance movement within the broader framework of the revolt of 1857 in eastern India. Patna, owing to its strategic location and administrative importance, emerged as a crucial centre of revolutionary planning, communication and dissemination of national ideas. The main objective of the uprising was to destabilise British political authority through coordinated civilian-military action, circulation of seditious literature and mobilisation of the local populace against colonial governance. In the Patna uprising, Peer Ali Khan played a central and decisive role in organising and sustaining this uprising. K. M. Khan notes that Peer Ali and his followers carried a flag that was white and blue. During their uprising against the British administration, Peer Ali Khan distributed up to 50 firearms to his supporters, which were procured with the assistance of Maulwi Mehdi, a patrolling magistrate in Patna who was arrested and executed without trial on June 20, 1857. Additionally, Ghulam Abbas was assigned the role of flag bearer, while Nandu Khar was instructed to position himself at the Haweli to monitor the insiders. The Commissioner of Patna at that time, William Taylor, described Peer Ali as the ‘chief rebel of the city.’ The most significant event in Patna was on the verge of happening when Peer Ali Khan and some of his associates devised a plan that the British could not anticipate.

⁴ William Taylor was the Commissioner of Patna, Bihar, during the rebellion of 1857 and was involved in the suppression of the rebellion in Patna. He was the top British official at Patna at that time.



On the evening of July 3rd, around eight o'clock, a group of over two hundred Muslim freedom fighters assembled at Pir Ali's residence with plans to attack the Roman Catholic Church and mission house in Patna. The following day, July 4th, Pir Ali led a large contingent of armed men to assault the administrative building at Gulzar Bagh in Patna. He gathered weapons and men and eventually advanced towards Patna. When the revolutionaries rose against the British administration, Peer Ali and his 200 followers headed towards Gulzar Bagh, the state administration's headquarters. They were stopped by Dr Lyell, accompanied by some local soldiers, near the opium godown in Patna, which was a significant symbol of the colonial economy. As the revolutionaries launched a comprehensive attack, the British, under Dr Lyell's command, began shooting at the crowd. Dr Lyell, along with several of his colleagues, was killed in the retaliatory gunfire from the revolutionaries. Upon learning of the Patna uprising, William Taylor, the Commissioner of Patna, dispatched additional forces to quell the rebellion. Many revolutionaries were killed, and dozens were injured in the British's indiscriminate shooting. Pir Ali and most of his followers managed to flee after the assault. The British administration, sensing a major conspiracy, intensified surveillance and tried to track all those involved in the uprising.

MARTYRDOM AND HIS LAST WORDS: A SPARK FOR THE GENERATIONS

On July 5, Pir Ali Khan and numerous associates were apprehended by the police for a predawn assault, following the Commissioner's orders. The majority were executed the following day. The police raided Peer Ali's shop, conducting a thorough search and seizing documents that indicated he was plotting something significant against the British. Over the next two days, he was subjected to interrogation and torture to extract information about the conspiracy and details about his close associates, particularly Lutf Ali. Despite being sentenced to death, Peer Ali was offered clemency in exchange for evidence. However, he remained silent, even when Taylor promised to spare his life if he disclosed full details of his associates. Peer Ali Khan refused and never disclosed his companions. Peer Ali declared,

"There are moments when sacrificing one's life is noble, and if I do so, thousands will rise to take my place."

History records that this humble bookseller did not yield to British demands and refused the offer of amnesty. He chose execution over a life of dishonour. Despite enduring severe torture, he did not betray his friends and comrades. The British officials failed to extract any information from him. The most startling revelation about Pir Ali Khan was the British government's fear of him, leading to his public execution without trial within two days after his arrest.

Accused of killing Dr Lyell, the principal assistant of an opium agent, Peer Ali Khan was publicly hanged on July 7, 1857, on the order of William Taylor. Taylor also commanded the execution of all those linked to Peer Ali and the confiscation of their properties. Pir Ali, before his execution, said,

"You can hang us, but you cannot kill our ideal. If I die, millions of brave hearts will be born from my blood to end your oppression."

CONCLUSION

The revolt of 1857, in general and the Patna uprising were the first anti-British forces to dismantle and challenge the British political authority in India. It significantly destabilised colonial confidence and unified national consciousness. However, the mainstream nationalist historiography has largely privileged the main leaders and regions, resulting in the marginalisation of various significant regional revolutionaries. This study establishes that Peer Ali Khan pivotal civilian organiser of the Patna uprising in Bihar. Who have played a revolutionary role like other freedom fighters. The heroes of the freedom struggle are in thousands, their contributions are similar to those of others who are popular in Indian history, but the difference is that they are later mentioned in history, parks, chowks, margs, movies, etc. Heroes like Peer Ali were the least known to people. Patriotic Movies, Parks, chowks, margs, schools, and govt. Buildings need to be renamed after these unsung heroes so that their sacrifices shall be remembered for generations to come. The history of Peer Ali is limited to Patna; it is to be spread throughout the nation. Patna has a small park named after Shaheed Pir Ali Khan and also a road connecting the city to the airport. It is observed that it is the same park where Peer Ali was hanged. There is a tomb in the city and a mohalla named after him, Peerbahor. For the last few years, the Bihar government has celebrated 7th July as 'Martyr Day' in memory of his martyrdom. Despite this, very few people in the country and in Bihar, even in Patna, know exactly about Peer Ali Khan and his contribution. But most people who pass in front of this park, or on these roads every day, are unaware of this name. Those who know that Peer Ali Khan was a soldier of the freedom struggle are also unaware of the fact that Peer Ali took part in the freedom struggle. He was not merely a product of the freedom movement but also a driving force behind it. Peer Ali Khan, who was martyred for the independence of the country, ignited such flames of revolution that continued to burn for the next hundred years. His sacrifice became an inspiration to the revolutionaries, and his story is a rare lesson of patriotism for the present generation as well. The Indian government need to frame policies to discover these unsung heroes of the freedom movement from all over the country to rediscover their contributions towards the freedom struggle. Further, in educational institutions,



programs should be organised like (Shaheed Divas) at the state level to remember these unsung heroes so that their sacrifices shall be remembered and preserved for the generations to come.

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