

150th Anniversary of Kuka Movement

PROF. HAZARA SINGH*

* The author is retired Head, Dept. of Journalism, Punjab Agriculture University, and an activist of the freedom struggle. Address: 3-C, Udham Singh Nagar, Ludhiana. 141001.

THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA has announced the observance of following historic events during 2007:

- 150th anniversary of the 1857 –Revolt by the Bengal Sepoys of the East India Company on May 10, acclaiming it as India's First War of Independence;
- Birth centenary of Martyr Bhagat Singh on September 27; and
- Diamond Jubilee of Independence on August 15.

Arguably, such celebrations ought to be objectively assessed for imparting their precise impact at the national level.

Designating 1857–Revolt (regarded as Sepoy Mutiny by the British) as India's First War of Independence leads to the implied recognition that the earlier invasions from North-West were not acts of foreign aggression, but had been a chain of home-coming by the natives despite their being marauders. If this were accepted as a historical fact then the heroic deeds of Indian patriots and reformers prior to the advent of East India Company would appear as acts of treason. Any resentment against the demolition of religious places would not only be misplaced but amount to sheer vandalism. If the invasions from North-West had been continual aggression then the acclaiming of 1857-Revolt by a few detachments of Bengal Sepoys as India's First War of Independence is questionable. **In fact our approach to historical events has been casual if not distorted.** The redemarcation of Bengal into two provinces in 1905 was resented as partition, whereas the separation of Burma from India in 1937 was accepted as a prerogative of the British. It would be worthwhile to note that Lokmanya Bal Ganga Dhar Tilak (1856-1920) who spearheaded a sustained campaign for *swadesi* and *swaraj* did not accept the 1857-Revolt as an uprising of the masses, because beyond Mughalsarai in the east, and Bhopal in the south- west, not a single voice of protest was heard.

The Punjab Government has taken a corrective step by deciding to observe the 150th anniversary of Namdhari (Kuka) Movement at a state-level function at Bhaini Sahib on April 15, 2007. Ram Singh, founder of the Namdhari sect, adored as Satguru (preceptor of truth) had been a soldier of the Khalsa Army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After the demise of Maharaja in 1839, he felt fed-up by the intrigues of his survivors and gradual departure from lofty ideals of Khalsa Raj. In disgust, he left the army service in 1845 and returned to his native place, Bhaini, near Ludhiana. **But after the annexation of Punjab by the East India Company in 1849, the provocative activities of patronized missionaries and the demoralization of the disarmed Khalsa Army awakened his national pride.** He resolved to restore the glorious values of sovereign secular Khalsa Rule.

It was on the Vaisakhi of 1857, about four weeks earlier than the revolt of Bengal Sepoys on May 10, that 'Satguru' Ram Singh founded the '*Sant Khalsa*'. It enjoined a strict code of simple pious living attuned to *Naam*. (Name of God). The new sect

began to be called Namdharis accordingly. Since in their ecstasy they often indulged into loud screams (called *kuk* in Punjabi) the epithet 'Kuka' also got added to Namdhari. Because wearing of kirpans was restricted by the East India Company regime, the Kukas began to carry sticks (lathis). Mass physical drills formed a part and parcel of their congregations.

The Namdharis were the first to start a parallel self-rule by introducing their own postal system for maintaining secrecy about their activities. They settled all mutual disputes through *sabhas* (panchyats) instead of petitioning to courts. Child marriage, infanticide, sati and all such practices derogatory to dignity of women were forbidden. Education through mother tongue was encouraged so that the youth got acquainted with their cultural heritage. **The campaign was the forerunner of the non-co-operation movements launched by Mahatma Gandhi from 1921 onwards.**

The British did not take kindly to the growing activities of the Namdharis, as they were reviving the national pride and martial spirit of the people.

The opening of a chain of slaughterhouses by the British for providing beef to the colonial army was resented by the Namdharis. The sentiment for cow- protection was exploited by the British to incite clashes between Namdharis and the local butchers. After one such encounter, sixty-six Kukas were blown off without any trial by L. Cowan, Deputy Commissioner, Ludhiana, on January 17-18, 1872. The executed included Bishen Singh, a teenager, who was hacked to pieces. Satguru Ram Singh was deported to Rangoon, where he passed away in 1885. As per its aims and goal, the foundation of '*Sant Khalsa*' on the Vaisakhi of 1857 deserves to be acclaimed as integral to India's First War of Independence.

