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English east india company's political predilection for banaras in post buxar period: an analytical aspect

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Abstract

Banaras is known for being a holy city and a trade centre, particularly for silk, but few books of history highlights the role of this holy city in the initial phase of colonialism in the 18th century when East India Company commenced spreading its tentacles towards northern India after establishing itself in Bengal with the victory in Plassey through conspiracy and perfectly crafted schemes. This paper deals with the reasons and circumstances that made Banaras so important in the eyes of East India Company and why its authorities, inspite of having no trust on the Raja's fidelity, put all its efforts to confirm his demands and position stability during and after Buxar battle. Dealing with the political, psychological, diplomatic, geo-political, geo-cultural, economic, internal relations, this paper delves into all important factors to elaborately comprehend the warp weft of the times. This research is based on study of archival sources, letters, correspondences, reports etc. preserved in National Archives of India, New Delhi, U.P. State Archives, Lucknow, Regional Archives of Allahabad and Varanasi.

Keywords: Banaras, raja Balwant Singh, Oudh, east India company, colonialism, 18th century history.

Introduction

Towards the close of 17th century the ebbing of Imperial authority led Banaras to face the ineluctable consequences where the *zamindars* and nobles began to declare themselves independent from the central authority. In 1728, Benares was given as *jagir* to Saadat Khan, who appointed Rustum Ali for revenue collection on payment of Rs 8 lakh annually ^[1]. Rustum Ali, much dependent on his deputies, gave the onus of collecting revenue of these *sarkars* to a *Trikarma Brahmin* or *Gautum Bhumihar*, Mansaram, who was a *zamindar* of Tetaria (Gangapur) in *pargana* Kaswar, 7 miles south west of Banaras. Due to Rustum Ali's failure in regular payment of revenue, Oudh *Nawab* Safdar Jang made Mansaram the ruler of Benares, who proffered Rs 13 lakh revenue for the grant of *sunnud* of three *sarkars* of Banaras, Jaunpur and Chunar, while Ghazeeপুর was given to Sheikh Abdullah on payment of Rs 3 lakh as revenue ^[2]. Thus, Mansaram became the founder of the ruling dynasty of Banaras.

With the ascendancy of East India Company as a political power in Bengal province in the sixth decade of the 18th century, the prominence of Banaras and its ruler Raja Balwant Singh, son of Mansaram, immensely augmented in the eyes of the English as a determining factor for policy shaping as its boundary was contiguous to both the powers-Oudh and English that was mere 60 miles beyond the English authority. This strategic location always placed Banaras and its Raja in the main concern of the English till they were, overtly or covertly, in hostile relation with the Oudh Nawab. They first realized the tremendous potential of Raja Balwant Singh during the eastern expedition of *Shahzadah* in 1761, when Ali Quli Khan, Deputy Governor, on his way to Allahabad was not able to cross the *Ganges* because of being impeded by Raja Balwant Singh at the orders of Oudh *Nawab*. It was indisputably to the English advantage to employ Raja Banaras as a check to the Muslim ruler of Oudh as both were sharing overtly hostile relations. All these factors made Banaras much important for the English after the battle of Buxar on October 23, 1764.

The English knew that in case of any territorial expansion towards Northern India, they would come in direct hostility with *Vizier* Shuja-ud-daula where Raja would join them. Regarding this English were remarkably candid in their expression, "We think it our duty to form against him (Shuja-ud-daula) all the enemies we possibly can that the proposed alliance

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with Balwant Singh, therefore be a proper measure and prove as well now as in all time to come a strong barrier and defence to the Bengal Provinces”^[3]. So, before the battle, the English entered into an agreement with the Raja by which he was to hold all the territories as it was under Shuja-ud-daula^[4]. Due to this agreement, Raja Balwant Singh, though joined the Nawab’s side, remained inactive along with his army throughout the battle and finally, after the decisive day of October 23rd, inclined towards the English. Even the Emperor Shah Alam, who was encamped in Banaras, was in favour of the English and regarded their victory as his own^[5].

Immediately after the battle, Raja Balwant Singh proposed Major Munro in case of their intention to take the possession of the *Vizier’s* country, the *sarkars* of Banaras, Jaunpur, Ghazipur and Bijaigarh should be given to him on the payment of Rs 24 lakhs as revenue on the same terms as he hold it from the *Vizier*^[5]. All these demands were accepted by Major Munro, who promised to grant the *sunnud*, and to hold the territories till the conclusion of the negotiations with the *Vizier*^[7]. Regarding the political decisions and actions to be taken by Major Munro immediately after the battle, strict instructions were given by the Fort William authorities that states, “With respect to Balwant Singh Rajah of Banaras and zamindar of Gauzeepoor Country, the double part he acted in the beginning of the war sufficiently warns us to put no confidence in him and therefore if he has not already been permitted to join you or you have entered into no engagement with him we would have him dispossessed of his Country and his person if possible secured^[8]. Here the moot question rises what prompted Major Munro to be so expeditious to accept all the demands of Raja Banaras inspite of the stringent orders from the Board to have no confidence in him for the part he played during the battle.

Firstly, the strategic position of Banaras had goaded him to ponder in favour of its Raja. They were cognizant that they could not shun any of their deserters to join the *Nawab’s* army unless they don’t had the support of Banaras Raja. Captain Jennings, who was camped at Sasaram, expressed his inability to shun the army of Kasim Ali from joining the *Nawab*, “Upon enquiry I find there is no way of preventing this Party but by crossing Caramnassa, their rout being round the hills through Balwant Singh’s Country which brings them to the Western gate of Rotas Gur without entering the Nabob dominions^[9] Even after defeat in Buxar, *Vizier* Shuja-ud-daula was again reviving his army with the *Pathans* joining him against the English and had an army of strength upto 30,000 standing against the English. To inflict a crushing defeat on the *Vizier*, it was indispensable to occupy the strategic forts of Allahabad and Chunar, which were still under the *Vizier* and the route to these forts pass via Banaras region. This automatically would place Banaras in between the Company territories and its forces, where the Raja could effortlessly rupture the line of supply and communication making it an onerous task for Major Munro. Even the Emperor, who was at Banaras wrote, “He (the King) assures that he once got Beni Bahadur and Balwant Singh to come in, *Vizier* would leave the Country immediately and never make any head again if once we got Iliabad and Chunar Fort...^[10].

According to the instructions of the Board, Major Munro could never contemplate of dispossessing Raja Bawlant Singh from Banaras as it would not only take great deal of

time making the circumstances propitious for *Vizier*, but also they were impelled to accept the Raja with no viable alternative as Major Munro articulated in his letter to the Board, “... there are very few people in the country who had any appointments. But such as have been turn’d out formerly by Balwant Singh and have no weight in the Country or troops at Command, so that consequence of putting any of them as Phousdars or Jemadars to collect the revenue and assist the King against any of his enemies would be keeping the army here I don’t know how long and would require at all time a stronger detachment of the troops remaining in the Country...^[11].

The English were cognizant that Banaras was a city of great antiquity and reverence in the eyes of the Hindus and at a time when they were emerging as a political power any military action against this holy city would make all the Hindus of the Country disgruntled. Moreover, the Marathas, who were great political power in Hindustan, had always displayed their interest in this holy city. In 1736 Peshwa Baji Rao demanded from the effete Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah to give the religious places of Banaras to him as *jagir*. English did not want to make themselves politically conspicuous in the eyes of the Marathas.

The military expense of the English Company had almost doubled, imposing an enormous amount of Rs 7 lakh annually. Even before the battle the Council ordered Officer-in-Commanding on June 11, 1764 to take possession of Ghazipur and collect its revenue for Company’s pecuniary needs with strict orders “to prevent any ravages being committed in the Country or injuries being done to the inhabitants, on contrary, all manner of encouragement and protection be given in order to gain their affection^[12]. Before the entering of the English army into Banaras, the inhabitants of the city promised to give Major Munro Rs 4 lakh for protection of the city, after which Major issued stringent orders to the sepoy against any pillaging or plundering of the city. Thus, where on one side he got a prodigious amount that was of great help at the war time, he also obviate any such situation that may create antagonistic feeling among the local inhabitants and the Raja of Banaras. Major Munro thought that maintaining affable relations with the Raja would provide the Company a prodigious amount of Rs 1,70,000 monthly as revenue that would be an enormous financial aid or it would be highly imprudent to leave a disgruntled Raja with a force of 15-20,000 horses in the region between the English territories in Bengal and their army in Allahabad, which could otherwise be used in the Company’s assistance to capture the impregnable fort of Chunar and Allahabad and after the battle, could be deployed for the defence of Bengal Province without an iota of financial burden on the Company.

All these undeniable circumstances and need of the time make the Board to ponder in the course of maintaining an amiable relation with the Raja on whom beforehand they had no confidence. They vested Munro with full power to come in agreement with the Raja as he deem necessary with directions that the power and authority over the Raja and his territory be vested in the Company by *sunnud* issued from the Emperor, and that the revenue received from Banaras shall be wrote off from the Royal Book of Revenue and be appropriated for the Company. The Court of Director’s, which till now regarded the ransom of Rs 4 lakhs from Banaras people as a “reward to the Army” and “compensation for the Loss” instructed Major Munro that

“no further considerations of this kind should be demanded from the inhabitants or expected by the army, but every care taken to conciliate the affection of the people.” When Munro reached Banaras, the Raja refused to appear in person unless he doesn't receive the signed articles from the English authority, which was instantly accorded to him ^[13].

The Raja, after the receipt of these articles, ordered his people to seize the *Vizier's* troops within Banaras and stopped the grain supply to seize Chunar. The Emperor gave Banaras to the Company as indemnity of the battle on December 29, 1764 by which the revenue was now to be paid to the Company ^[14]. It was agreed that the annual revenue would remain the same and the first payment of this collection was to be given to the Emperor on account of having no instant support. Accordingly the Raja paid him Rs 7 lakh on behalf of the Company. The Board accepted their dire pecuniary needs in a letter to General Carnac, “We are glad to find payments already made from Balwant Sing collections, proved so reasonable, a supply, but as it appears we may still continue in want of money ^[15].”

On 5th January Raja Balwant Singh fled to Latifpur as on the very next day i.e. 6th January Major Munro, with whom he was in agreement, was replaced by Carnac and the command of the army devolved upon Fletcher. Another reason for the Raja to go to Latifpur was the *Nawab Vizier's* proffer of friendship to the English through a letter which states, “If the English will now enter into friendship with me, I will immediately dismiss their enemies and withdraw my protection from them and this friendship being confirmed, I will join with the English army...” ^[16] The Raja was full of apprehensions and speculations of the fast changing political conditions as apparently mentioned by Major Carnac in his letter, “...Balwant Singh's having eloped from our army and desiring an explicit account of our plan and views in the prosecution of the war that he regulate his conduct accordingly but offering it at the same time as his opinion that we have engaged ourselves too far with the King unless it be our determined resolution to pursue Shuja-ud-daula to the utmost and to decline all further reconciliation with him ^[17].”

Major Fletcher had sent forces to besiege Chunar and Allahabad on 22nd and 24th January respectively and Raja's support was indispensable as the supply line between English territory and Allahabad hinges on him. So, Major requested the Raja to join and tried to cajole him by asking the Emperor to write to him to the same effect. Even the Emperor summoned the Raja for appearance ^[18]. At this the Raja, who wanted a written assurance, sent an agreement to Major Fletcher through the Emperor and expressed that he would come in attendance of His Majesty only after full gratification ^[19]. Even the Emperor wrote to Fletcher, “he will not come to the Presence without the attainment of his desires and the completion of his business ^[20].”

On 6th February an agreement of Raja Balwant Singh was sent to the King signed and sealed by Mr. Marriott and Major Fletcher tried to cajole him divulging, “Whatever may be conducive to the daily increase of his (Balwant Singh) honour and reputation shall be done. This we swear to by God and the Prophet Jesus. This agreement shall by no means be deviated from ^[21].” It was only after this agreement that the Raja Banaras sent an army under the command of his brother to join the imperial troops seizing the Chunar fort and another under Babu Samir Singh, his brother's son to Allahabad. Eventually on 8th February both the forts

surrendered and the possession was taken successfully under the command of Stibbert and Major Fletcher respectively.

Though the Board permitted to come in agreement with the Raja because of the ineluctable political conditions, but even after Raja's open military assistance and capture of Allahabad they were very suspicious of him still no action was ever taken against the Raja even after the surrender of the forts and all that he demanded was accepted, as English did not want to create any disturbance in this corner while the army was planning to march to Lucknow. Their supply line was dependent completely on the Raja and moreover, they cannot ignore the whooping amount that they were receiving from him as revenue.

In spite of the fact that the Company was facing pecuniary difficulties, it decided to leave their claim over articles amounting to Rs 2,28,306.10 (*Jagir* of Bhadohi-135000 and *Kirat* and allowance-Rs 93306.10) which was earlier left in the agreement for further contemplation by the Board. It was only “in hopes of making it his interest to remain faithful by the advantages he will reap from his connection with us the security that We look for from extending our frontiers being great object than any increase of our revenues ^[22]”

After the crushing defeat of the *Vizier* in Corah on 3rd May, there were protracted negotiations for the treaty. In May, Clive reached Calcutta as the new Governor of Bengal with instructions from the Court of Directors, which had rejected the transfer of Banaras and Ghazeeपुर to the Company because their policy was not to extend the possessions of the Company. They wanted to maintain a buffer state between the English territory and the Nawab Vizier with a friendly Raja. Moreover, they did not want to become prominent in the eyes of the Marathas by taking possession of Banaras, which had always been a place of their political and religious interest because of being holy capital of Hindus. Finally treaty of Allahabad was signed on August 16, 1765 between Shuja-ud-daula, Nawab Nundjum-ud-daula of Bengal and the English Company with the Emperor's approval. The articles concerned to Balwant Singh are following ^[23].

Article V - “His Highness Shuja-ud-dawlah engages in a most solemn manner to continue Bulwant Singh in the zamindaries of Benares, Ghazeeपुर and all those districts he possessed at the time he came over to the late Nabob Jaffier Aly Cawn and the English on condition of his paying the same revenues as heretofore.”

Article VII- “It being firmly resolved to restore to His Highness the country of Benares and the other districts now rented by Bulwant Sing, notwithstanding the grant of the same from the King to the English Company, it is therefore agreed that they shall be ceded to His Highness in (the) manner following viz. They shall remain in the hands of the English Company with their revenue till the expiration of the agreement between Bulwant Sing and the Company, being on the 27th of November next; after which His Highness shall enter into possession, the Fort of Chunar excepted which is not to be evacuated until the 6th article of this treaty be fully complied with.”

Banaras had always been a matter of great import to the English. Though it was restored to the *Nawab* and the Raja was to hold the territory in the same manner with the same revenue, but by this treaty the English secured a firm foothold in Banaras in particular and in politics of northern India in general. They wanted to take the advantage of Raja Balwant Singh's overt hostile relation with the Nawab and

use him against the Nawab, who was still the *Vizier* of the Empire and had great influence over the politics of the time. They wanted to maintain a buffer State between the English and the *Nawab's* territory and under the cloak of guarantee of security, which they gave to the Raja in 1765; the English always interfered into all the matters between the *Nawab* and the Raja. They were cognizant of the fact that affable Raja in Banaras would bring inestimable benefit to the Company. Though the English had not taken Banaras under their direct administration, but the compelling political state of affairs made them to maintain affable relations with the Raja and use his wealth and influence over the inhabitants and the troops for their own advantage and did not ever squander any opportunity to interfere into the matters of Nawab through Banaras and were successful in the accomplishment of all their plans in later days.

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