
NAMDHARI MOVEMENT: BABA RAM SINGH'S POLITICAL VIEW

Rajni Thakur*

The consolidation of British supermacy in India during the 18th & 19th centuries reflected the obsolescence of Indian social practices and institution with the growth of colonial dominance, a new intelligentsia developed which imbibed the liberal western cultures and recognised the need to launch movements to reform social institutions and religious outlooks inherited from the past. Indian society in 19th century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstition and social obscurantism. So far as the Punjab are concerned, there were two well known movements, the Kuka movement and the Singh Sabha. The work of the movement should not be under estimated. They created a reawanking in the land.

The other movements devoted themselves entirely to social and religious reform activities whereas the kukas took an integrated view of the problem facing the country and visualised the various questions, social, religious and political, in their proper perspective. The government subjected the kukas to hardships and strict surveillance. The restrictions clamped on them were removed as late as 1922 on their assurance that they were not opposed to the British government. The founder of the movement was Baba Balak Singh. He was a close devout follower of Jawahar Mal. Like his master he exhorted his followers to return to this simple religious messages of the gurus. The impact of Balak Singh's personality was evidently considerable for by the time he died is 1862. At his death he was succeeded as leader of the sect by Ram Singh, a disciple who had fallen under his spell while serving as a soldier in the army of Ranjit Singh's successors. Ram Singh transferred the kuka centre from Hazro to his own village of Bhaini in Ludhiana district and at once the sect began to grow rapidly, both in the numbers and in prominence. All agree that the kuka sect had begun as a religious reform movement within the Sikh community whether the Namdhari movement was socio-religious or political in its ultimate objectives.

For a long time it was believed that Guru Ram Singh stood for a social and religious reform of the society in the Punjab, but British suspicion turned him into a political fighter. The whole inspiration of the Namdhari movement seems to be have been drawn from the lone fight which Guru Gobind Singh waged against the political master of India, namely, Aurangzeb and against the religious monopolists such as the Brahmans, Ram Rais, Udasis and other Faqirs. Similarly, it was impossible for the Sikhs to forget the sovereignty and glory which they had enjoyed in the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh.

*Asst. Professor, Dept of History, SMDRSD College, Pathankot

The revival of their political glory was definitely their great aim as well as a part of their religion. This movement had political overtones in the sense that Baba Ram Singh advocated the boycott of Government Educational Institutions, of courts, jobs and imported clothes.

Kuka movement started with a political aim, for a few years after its foundation the movement of Baba Ram Singh carried on its work quietly. It was not till 1863 that the government first became alive to its political implications. Mr. Macnab, the Deputy Commissioner of Sialkot, was the first official to draw the attention of the Punjab Government to the matter. The Government of the Punjab issued instructions to the Deputy Commissioners and Superintendents of Police of all districts to keep a vigilant eye on Ram Singh and his followers and to send a confidential reports. The severe restrictions imposed by the Government on the Kuka movements had the result quite opposite of what it had hoped for. The numbers of the Kukas rose tremendously. In 1863 they were in thousands. After a few years they were in lacs. Faced with the problem of strict official Vigilance over all their activities, the Kukas thought it extremely necessary to strengthen their functional machinery. Subas, Naib subas and Jathedars played the vital role of organizers, preachers and supervisors. Inter communication and co-ordination, without letting the Government know anything about this, being of fundamental importance to the efficiency of the organisation.

The English understood the real character of this movement as early as the year 1866. From time to time, they obtained reports from private sources, secret agents, commissioners and police officials about the nature of the Kuka movement. Even the postal system of the Kukas was hardly conditioned for purposes of religious activity. Postal system was designed to convey important messages of a political nature or at least anti-British contents such secrecy presupposed the presence of hostility.

It may also be interesting to mention that contacts of the Kukas with the Russians in central Asia and the rulers of Kashmir and Nepal could not have been forged without political objects. From his exile, the political views of Guru Ram Singh are also revealed to us in many of this letters written from Burma. He assured his disciples of his determination to come back. He instructed them to unite. He prohibited them from taking service under the government, emphasising with certainty the overthrow of the British rule. He threatened to repeat the performances of the year 1857, if he were not released. He enquired about the recruitment of soldiers in the Punjab and the impressment of carriages and oxen by the British authorities.

In short it may be concluded that the above contacts unfold to a great extent the political ideas of Guru Ram Singh. The views found in original documents also give us the same conclusion, that is, Guru Ram Singh stood for religious revival and the political resurrection of his

countrymen. It is clear that he believed in non-co-operation with the government which he went on preaching even from his exile. He also advised his followers to live a devoted and dedicated life with religion as the base, with Swadeshi and non-co-operation with the government as the weapons and the desire to attain freedom as the political aim.

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