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## “Significance of Unnao District in the Rebellion of 1857”

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### Abstract:

*The present paper deals with the revolutionary war between the rebels of Unnao District and British Army during the revolt of 1857- Till now it was customary to highlight the rebellion in Lucknow and Kanpur and the historic sacrifices of Unnao District, lying between Lucknow and Kanpur was seldom taken seriously by the historians. It was the geographical situation of the Unnao that provided an edge to the rebels over the mighty British forces. The emerging facts of the war also highlights the role of ordinary people in the rebellion of 1857, which is popularly depicted as mutiny by the British historians or as a national war led by few highlighted feudal elements. Based upon few archival documents the researcher has tried to establish significance of bravery and sacrifice of the people of Unnao District.*

**Keywords:** Unnao, British Army, rebellion, etc

The boundaries of Unnao district, spread over an area of 4558 square kilometers in the Doab of Ganga and Sai river, are surrounded by Lucknow in the north, Kanpur and Fatehpur in the south-west, Hardoi in the west-north and Rae Bareli districts in the south-east. From east to south, this district extends from 67 to 107 kilometers and from east to west, it extends from 41 to 50 kilometers. Due to its location on the southern border of Awadh, Unnao had become very important from the war point of view in the rebellion of 1857. Kanpur was a strong center of rebels on the other side of the river Ganga. Both the major water routes leading to Delhi via Calcutta and the Rajpath passed through Kanpur. Nana Saheb Peshwa was leading the rebellion in Bithoor and the rebels had built

a very strong camp in Kalpi. The rebel forces used all their power to stop the flow of water of the Ganges because at that time the movement of the British forces was mainly through the river Ganges. Almost all the water routes from Arrah and Buxar to Delhi were once under the control of the rebels and the responsibility for their security was also on the best commanders of that time. 2 Whatever forces were sent to suppress the rebellion in Awadh (Lucknow Residency), General Havelock, Neal, Hopgrant and Major General Colin Campbell. To enter them into Awadh, it was necessary to fight on every part of the land of Unnao. 3 The battles fought on the land of Unnao were very exciting.

To rescue the British surrounded in the Lucknow Residency, General Havelock first somehow crossed the 1453 meter wide Ganga river during the rainy season. General Hopgrant has admitted in a telegram sent regarding the war that 'It is very dangerous to cross the Ganges and enter Unnao but this danger will have to be taken at any cost's. Even after the defeat, Nana Saheb stood at the back of the British with about 300 soldiers in Fatehpur. On the way, the bridge over the river Sai near Bani was strongly fortified by the rebels and if it was attacked, Orange would have had to lose about a third of his army. Here the weather was also showing its effect and if the British reached Lucknow with a total of twelve or fifteen hundred soldiers, the thousands of soldiers standing on the streets there would annihilate the British forces on sight. Despite such danger, the British crossed the Ganga without seeing any way. 4

On 29 July 1857, General Havelock's army climbed 6 miles above the Ganga and attacked the rebel forces at Magarwara. The rebel army was defeated yet he did not lose courage and set up another front in Bashiratganj but the rebels were defeated. After heavy losses, Havelock again had to leave for Magarwara to get new military support. In his absence the rebels again took control of Bashiratganj. To recapture Bashiratganj, the British army had to fight the rebels again on 5 August 1857. Due to heavy losses, Havelock was forced to go to Kanpur instead of Lucknow.

Due to the British not getting the opportunity to cross the Ganges, their morale was adversely affected. Whereas on the other hand the rebels started gathering more rapidly. Feeling helpless, the British gathered all their strength and started moving forward by crossing the Ganges with about 400 soldiers. On the afternoon of 11 August 1857, while moving towards Unnao, once again a fierce battle took place between the British and the rebels at the post of Budhiya. The British, seeing their numbers dwindling, attacked with full force. As a result, the rebels had to retreat with heavy casualties. But even after this war, the rebels did not lose their morale and maintained their strength. On 19 September 1857, the British army again reached Unnao under the leadership of Outram and Havelock. Two days later, on 21 September, a fierce battle took place in Magarwara. The British admitted that for them the fighting villages of Awadh surrounded by mud walls were a strange experience and till now they had rarely found such fighting soldiers anywhere in the world. Every

person stood against the British and they were ready to fight at any cost. It was because of such courageous people that small houses made of mud became like strong forts that could be conquered with great difficulty. How many villages were burnt, how many people were killed. The British won this battle but difficulties remained until the path was cleared. Ultimately the British again needed new armies. Only when they got new soldiers were they able to move forward. 5

The places won earlier by the British became stronger and stood in the way and the British forces had to make a fresh effort to reclaim them. While reaching from Magarwara to Unnao and from Unnao to Bashiratganj, the British forces had to step back several times and had to think again and again before moving forward. What was done during the day was put to rest at night and everything had to be done again in the morning. In the end, when Havelock reached Lucknow after so many sacrifices and went inside the Residency and was surrounded by an army of lakhs of rebels, he felt as if all his sacrifices had gone in vain. After the fall of Lucknow, mighty generals like Colin Campbell realized that only Lucknow was under their control in the whole of Awadh. After this, when with great courage he again started fighting the forces of rebels roaming freely in Unnao, he realized that the real fight was yet to come. On 17 February 1858, Nana had camped at Fatehpur Chaurasi to meet Begum Hazrat, but Hopegrant's army defeated Nana and removed him from there. On 23 February 1858, a fierce battle took place between the British and the rebels in Miyanganj Bind in which the British were victorious and destroyed the town. Then he entered Daudiakheda on 10 May 1858 where a fierce battle took place between Talukedar Ram Rao Baksh and the British. After this, a fierce battle took place between Bhagwantnagar on 12 May and Devi Baksh of Purva and the British on 8 November. These rebels fought the British forces at a time when the movement was disintegrating and the rebels were facing shortage of ammunition, gunpowder and money. 6

Every corner of Unnao district has memories of such battles. On the request of Ram Baksh, the British were burnt alive in the Dhilleshwar temple and the throats of the remaining British were cut, due to which the British caught them, hanged them on a banyan tree in their capital Daudiya Kheda and hanged them on 28 December 1859. The martyrs who supported him were also given death sentence, which included Laltabakht, Brijlal, Ramprasad and others. 7

Rao Ram Baksh was martyred and sacrificed his life on the altar of the motherland. Many brave soldiers achieved heroic feat by fighting the British at every step. That is why the land of Unnao has been equally revolutionary. Unnao has been the area of Bais Rajputs. Trilok Chandra Vaish kept flying the flag of independence in Daudiakheda. Along with this, he displayed extraordinary courage in the battles of Bashiratganj, Semri and Purva. The sacrifice of Shivratan Singh of Garhi Bihar is also not less. 8

The third immortal fighter of the district was Narpat Singh of Ruiya (near Nanamau). This place was very important because it connected the roads to Bithoor, Billaur and Kannauj. Narpat Singh immortalized this place by showing courage befitting this importance. 9

Due to these revolutionary men, Unnao continued to struggle even after the fall of Lucknow. After some time, when the atrocities of the British started again, this region bore it like a brave man without making any noise. Despite being badly devastated in the rebellion of 1857, Unnao stood up in the very first challenge in the new era of freedom movement.

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