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HISTORY OF ALIGARH AND EARLY ANTI-BRITISH UPRISINGS BEFORE 1857: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract: Aligarh is renowned for its Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) which has made the city and the district an educational hub for Muslims. A great deal of writing/scholarship has been dedicated to this aspect of the Aligarh but what remains under explored is its history particularly from the British takeover of the district to the foundation of Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College (later AMU). This paper, therefore, attempts to fill in this gap. It does so by giving an overview of the history of the district till 1803. The paper also attempts to trace the history of early anti-British uprisings in Aligarh by focusing particularly on the period from 1803 to 1857.

Keywords: Aligarh, Revolt, Mughals, Maratha, British.

Introduction

The district of Aligarh lies between 27° 30' and 28° 10' north latitude, and 77° 30' and 78° 40' east longitude in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) and comprises the southernmost portion of the Meerut division (Nevill, 1909, p. 1). It lies in the fertile area between the rivers Ganges and Yamuna known as the Doab (a tract of land between the two confluent rivers). While the former river separates the district from Budaun in the extreme northeast, the latter river constitutes the dividing line between Aligarh and Gurgaon district of the Punjab (now Haryana) in the northwest. The district has been known by different names from time to time viz. Koil, Muhammadgarh, Sabitgarh, Ramgarh and Aligarh (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 21). Muhammadgarh, Sabitgarh, and Ramgarh were actually the names given to the Fort, built about three miles to the north of the city, under different regimes (Waheed, 2011, pp. 11-12). Koil, as it was called up to the early 19th century, covered not only the city, but the entire district, though its geographical limits kept changing from time to time (Siddiqi, 1981, pp.21-27). It got its present name Aligarh after the conquest of the fort in 1773 by a Shia commander, Mirza Najaf Khan and his lieutenant, Afrasiyab Khan who named it after Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali.

Methodology

Author has used Historical Methodology in carrying this study. The study offers a descriptive analysis of the history of Aligarh. It does so by exploring various primary and secondary sources viz. Gazetteers, Settlement Reports, Statistical Records etc.

Koil in Ancient History

The town of Aligarh, Kol or Koil is of undoubtedly great antiquity. Hindu legend makes the district part of the kingdom of Pandavas, whose ruler Nicharku is said to have moved his capital to Ahar in Bulandshahr after Hastinapur had been swept away by Ganges. But the identification of the town with the Kosambhi rests on no ground what so ever. The name Koil was given to the city by Balrama, who slew here the great Asura (demon) Kol, and with the assistance of the Ahirs subdued this part of the Doab (Atkinson, 2010, p. 484). Buddhist remains found in Balai Qila at Koil and placed in Aligarh Institute point out to the fact that the town was inhabited during the Buddhist times. The coins of the satraps of Muttra (Mathura) have been found at Shahgarh or Sahegarh near Kauriaganj and at other places in the Bulandshahr district which suggest that the town would have been under the sway of Muttra (Mathura) and later under the Kushans too (Nevill, 1909, p. 161). A copper plate of Skanda Gupta's time suggests that Sarvanga was a vishyapati (governor) of antervedi (doab) which suggests that Koil was under the Guptas. We also see that Koil was under the control of Harsha as well who had his capital at Kannauj (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 33). Later on, Koil developed as a noted Rajput stronghold and, between the eighth and tenth centuries, it was firmly held by some local chiefs, the Dor Rajputs, who were connected with the Tomar kingdom of Delhi (Graff, 1999, p. 137).

Koil under the Delhi Sultans

A portion of the district during the middle of the 12th century was under Ghadavala Dynasty (11th -12th Century) whose last ruler Raja Jai Chand of Kannauj was defeated by Shihabuddin Ghori in the battle of Chandawar in 1193 AD (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 47). Hasan Nizami and Minhaj-us-Siraj inform us that, in the year 1193 A.D., Qutub-ud-din Aibak marched from Delhi to Koil (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 47) and captured 'one of the most celebrated fortresses of Hind' (Atkinson, 2010, p. 485). It may be added here that Koil was held by Dor Chiefs at the beginning of the 12th century (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 47). After ensuring the peace of the district Aibak appointed Hisam-ud-din Ghulbak as the first Muslim governor of the Koil. We next hear of Koil in connection with the murder of the Vazir Nizam-ul-Mulk Mahzab-ud-din by the Turkish nobles in 1242. In 1244, Ullugh Khan as the chamberlain (amir-i-hajib) marched out of Delhi into Koil to quell a rebellion of the Native Rajas (Atkinson, 2010, p. 486). To commemorate the name and the victories of his



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master Nasir-ud-din Mahmud, Balban got erected the great minar of Koil with also an inscription engraved on it. Abhishek Kaicker states that Sultan Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud had apparently intended a grand structure, rivalling the Qutub Minar in Delhi (Abhishek Kaicker, 2019, p. 45). Unfortunately, on the orders of Sir George Edmonstone, this interesting monument was vandalized in 1861, to make room for improvements round the Jama Masjid of Aligarh (Siddiqi, 1981).

In 1259, Koil was put under the charge of Malik Sher Khan, which somehow relieved Balban of his position. Later, when Balban ascended the throne, he put the fief of Koil under Muhammad Sherandaz. During the reign of Jalal ud din Firoz, Malik Kiki was sent as the governor of Koil (Nevill, 1909, p. 166). We do not come across much information about Koil under Allaudin Khilji except for the fact that when the Mongols, under Targhi, invaded Hindustan and encamped on Jamuna Bank between Delhi, the imperial forces, which were shut up in Koil and Baran, were unable to move towards Delhi. Koil like other districts of the Doab was placed under the Khalisa (crown land) by Allauddin (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 55). Ibn Batuta describes Koil during the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, 'a fine town surrounded by mango grooves. It is from this that the environs of Koil acquired the name of Sabazabad, or 'the green country' (Atkinson, 2010, p. 487). However, the reign of Muhammad Tughlaq was characterized chiefly by the terrible distress that prevailed throughout the doab due to recurrent famines (Nevill, 1909, p. 166).

A joint charge of Koil and Awadh was given to Hisam-ul-Mulk and Hisam-ud-din in 1376 by the then ruler Firoz Shah Tughlaq. Koil, as also the whole country in general fell in a state of disorder after the death of Firoz Shah. The invasion of Timur and his departure saw this portion of the Doab fell into the hands of Iqbal Khan. His expeditions against refractory Hindu tribes resulted into Koil becoming a scene for many battles between Jaunpur and Delhi forces. Nothing substantial happened during the reign of Sikandar Lodhi in Koil except the fact that he gave Koil to Umar Khan (son of Sikandar Khan Sur). However, during the early years of Ibrahim Lodhi, the zamindars of Jartoli, (village in pargana Tappal 27 miles west of Aligarh) rose in a rebellion and got killed the then Governor of Koil, Umar Khan in 1518 (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 65). Qasim Khan, the governor of Sambal, himself proceeded to Tappal and inflicted a crushing defeat on the rebels and the district was completely brought under subjection (Atkinson, 2010, p. 488.). Koil was then given to Umar's son, Muhammad Khan, who in 1525 built the fort of Muhammadgarh, afterwards known as Aligarh, as is recorded in an extant inscription (Nevill, 1909, p. 168). An inscription of Ibrahim Lodi's reign which was placed in Kali Masjid in mohalla Bani Israelin, recorded the construction of a mosque in Koil in 1523-1524 by Ibrahim Lodi. Siddiqi argues that the architecture of Kali Masjid, which is in a good state, conforms to the Lodi style of architecture (Siddiqi, 1981). However, nothing substantial was done which could testify to any real interest on the part of the Muslim rulers for the site when, on the other hand, they were to spend lavishly on some neighbouring cities. It was in fact left to a semi-autonomous Mughal functionary to rebuild the mosque which topped the citadel, a rather large but plain five-domed building constructed in local limestone (Graff, 1999, p. 138).

Koil under the Mughals

A year later i.e., 1526, Babur defeated Ibrahim Lodi in the Battle of Panipat. After the capture of Delhi, Babur very rapidly got hold of Doab and established his supremacy by appointing Kachak Ali as the governor of Koil. On the verge of Battle of Khanwah (1527), Kachak Ali was attacked and made captive by a Pathan leader Ilyas Khan. His success, however, didn't last long as Babur, after securing his victory at Khanwah, deputed Muhammad Ali along with Shaikh Ghuran and Abdul Malik to punish insurgents headed by Ilyas Khan (Siddiqi, 1981). He was defeated and taken prisoner to Agra where he was flayed alive (Nevill, 1909). There still exists a mohalla near the centre of the town, called Babri Mandi, i.e., Babur's Market. The district continued to remain under the control of the Mughals until Sher Shah expelled Humayun. It's pertinent to mention here that Esa Khan Sherwani of Koil played his part in expelling Humayun. We are also informed that Sher Shah Suri after becoming the emperor rewarded the Sherwanis of Koil for the services that they had rendered to him before becoming an Emperor (Sherwani, 2018, p. 13).

Qiya Khan Gung at Jalali, i.e., Koil, paid his allegiance to Akbar and was later given a mansab of five thousand (Abul Fazal, Akbar Nama, II, p.14, cf. Siddiqi, Aligarh District, p. 70). Akbar made Koil a sarkar and attached it to the Subah of Agra (Hutchinson, 1856, p. 2). The sarkar contained twenty-one mahals or parganahs divided into four dasturs viz. Koil, Marahra, Akbarabad and Thana Farid (Atkinson, 2010). It was much larger than what it is at the present since it embraced almost all the Bulandshahr and a large portion of Etah, as well as part of the Mathura. It was during Akbar's reign that Mir Muhammad Gesu, a Shia, built an Idgah in 1563. The history of the district under the successors of Akbar was uneventful. This was probably because, as Nevill argued, Koil was too near to Agra, the Capital of the Empire, to possess any political and strategical importance of its own (Nevill, 1909).

Among the Mughal governors of Koil, Sabit Khan, during the reigns of Farrukhsiyar and Muhammad Shah, is best known and remembered (Hutchinson, 1856, p. 2).¹ He took a keen interest in the building activities. He repaired the Jamia Masjid at Jalali (1724), built the tomb of Allah Baksh (1717) (Malik, cf. Siddiqi, 1981), founded the Harduaganj market, (Hutchinson, 1856, p. 115) repaired the mosque in the centre of the town and renovated the old Lodi fort, renaming it to Sabitgarh after his own name. His



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descendants, having assumed the title 'Nawab', are still to be found in the district. Soon after his death the district fell in to a state of chaos as was the case with the whole Mughal Empire during the first half of 18th century. The Jats who were searching for an opportunity to sneak in very well capitalized the disorder created by the incursions of the Marathas and the Nadir Shah. The Jats soon became the masters of the region and their rise, according to Jamal M. Siddiqi, has probably been the most important feature of the social and political history of the district in the early half of the 18th century (Siddiqi, 1981, p. 96). In 1757, Surajmal, the Jat leader took the fort of Sabitgarh and changed its name to Ramgarh, still a name of a village close to the fort (Nevill, 1909, p. 489; Atkinson, 2010, p. 170).ⁱⁱ The fort was strategically located since all roads leading from Mathura and Agra to Delhi intersected here.

The Jats, however, could not hold their possession for long. In 1759, the Afghans, under Ahmad Shah Abdali, expelled them from Koil. However, all their possessions were later restored to Surajmal conditional on his not aligning with the Marathas (Hutchinson, 1856). The Jats managed to hold the area till 1773 but were inflicted a crushing defeat and driven out of the Koil by the large Army of Najaf Ali Khan in 1773. Najaf Khan himself undertook the control of Doab and got the Ramgarh fort repaired and changed its name to Aligarh (Atkinson, 2010, p. 491). He died in 1782 and was succeeded by Afrasahib as Amir-ul-Umra. Afrasahib had a very unpleasant tenure and was finally assassinated in 1784 with the connivance of Mahadji Sindhia (Nevill, 1909).

Aligarh under the Marathas

After the capture of the Aligarh fort, Mahadji Sindhia had to march on to tackle the Rajput chiefs at Jaipur on 16 February 1786 (Siddiqi, 1981, p.138). Taking advantage of the Sindhia's absence, Umaraogir Gosainⁱⁱⁱ, brother of Raja Himmat Bahadur, started attacking Maratha posts with the help of the local Jat zamindars of Hathras and Mursan (Sarkar, n.a, p. 138). Sindhia's collectors were imprisoned and expelled, Keso Pant (who was put in charge of Doab region), was himself slain and his war equipment plundered (Sarkar, n.a, p.224). Sindhia finally managed to re-establish his authority in 1788 and Aligarh remained under the hands of the Marathas until the British takeover in 1803. Aligarh, under the Marathas, is chiefly remarkable as the place where Sindhia, with the aid of De Boigne, a French commandant, organised those regular battalions drilled and armed after the European fashion, which subsequently gave a tough fight to their enemies (Atkinson, 2010; Nevill, 1909; Hutchinson, 1856). "Their merits," as Nevill argued, "were tested fully in the war between Sindhia and Holkar, when the latter had the services of Dundrence's battalions," (Atkinson, 2010; Nevill, 1909) and practically all Maratha victories, from the Chambal to the Himalayas, were attributed to these troops alone.

In 1796, Perron succeeded De Boigne. He soon succeeded in assuming the supreme command and the whole region obeyed his orders (Atkinson, 2010; Nevill, 1909; Hutchinson, 1856). Everything was going well in his favour until he was threatened by the enemies and at the same was asked by Sindhia to assist Peshwa. By the time he would have offered his assistance to Peshwa, the Peshwa had already joined hands with the British which resulted into a triple alliance between Sindhia, Holkar, and the Bhonsle, on the one hand and the British, the Nizam and the Peshwa on the other.^{iv} On September 22, 1801, by the treaty between Nawab Sadat Ali Khan of Awadh and East India Company, the British frontier was advanced to well within 15 miles of Koil (Siddiqi, 1981). The ceded territory included the pargans of Jalali, Akbarabad (now Akabad), Sikandrarao, and Gangiri, which passed into the "exclusive management and control of the East India Company" (Aitchinson, n.a, cf. Siddiqi, 1981, p.157). Perron came up with a plan suggesting Sindhia to attack the Nizam while himself holding the northern Doab and Holkar attacked Surat and Ambaji Ingolia, and Shamsheer Bahadur of Bundelkhand attacked the lower Doab, then held by British (Atkinson, 2010).

Aligarh from the British takeover in 1803 to 1857

The Maratha chieftains formally adopted Perron's plan of action which resulted in the declaration of war against British in 1803. Having captured Sasni fort (7 Feb. 1803), Baijigarh (8 Feb), and Kachaura fort, Aligarh fort was now the only and probably the toughest obstacle between the British and their complete takeover of the district (Pester, n.d pp. 20-53, 61-70). The fort of Aligarh was strategically located. Its importance can be gauged from the fact that Lord Lake in a letter to Marquiss Wellesly wrote that, "I have only to add that, without the fort of Allygurh, we could not have had the entire possession of the Doab, indeed, until it was ours, we were liable to be driven out of it at any time" (Martin, n.d, cf. Siddiqi, 1981, p. 163).

The British forces, under Lord Lake, were mobilized towards the frontier on 29th August where they engaged in a head-on fight with Perron's forces. At the first round of engagement General Perron left the battlefield, for the security of his family. Having flown away from the battlefield to Mathura, Perron later surrendered and deflected to the British side at Sasni where Lord Lake was stationed (Pester, pp. 147-149). The British army also made elaborate arrangements for attacking Aligarh fort. The fort, having been reconstructed by the French Engineers using modern technology, was considered an impregnable stronghold (Nevill, 1909). Two major British attacks, one under Col. Manson and another under Major McLeod, on the fort failed miserably. The third one resulted in the success of the British army. It was made possible by Lucan, a French officer who betrayed Sindhia and guided the British through



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the fort. On 4th September, 1803, with the fall of Aligarh, the territories to the north as far as the Siwaliks, and to the east as far as Sadra, fell in to the hands of the British (Atkinson, 2010).

The district of Aligarh was formed in 1804 by uniting the second, third, and fourth divisions as well as with the addition of parganah Anupshahr from Moradabad and parganah Sikandrarao from Etawah.^v On August 1st, 1804, C. Russell was appointed Collector of the district. Aligarh was one of the seven trans-Yamuna districts captured from the Marathas and, along with other districts ceded by the Nawab of Awadh, formed part of what came to be called the 'Ceded'^{vi} and the 'Conquered Provinces'^{vii} in 1805 (Hasan, 1989, p. 24). As the very name suggests the district comprised of the ceded parganas acquired in 1802 and partly of conquered parganas acquired a year later when recalcitrant zamindars, hostile to the imposition of British rule, were suppressed (Hasan, 1989, p. 24). Thirteen years after the British takeover of Aligarh, Kasganj tahsil, comprising parganahs Bilram, Faizpur Badariya, Soron, and half Marahra, from Etawa were annexed to Aligarh while Firozabad, Khandauli, and Sahpu were transferred to Agra (Atkinson, 2010, pp. 348-349). In 1818, seven parganas in the north were given to Meerut, and six years later in 1824, the Kasganj tahsil was assigned to the Sahaswan or Badaun district (Nevill, 1909, p. 123).

War with Holkar

The capture of Aligarh was followed by that of Dehli, and the whole of the Maratha possessions in the Doab thus passed into the hands of the British (Nevill, 1909, p.179). Despite this, the district could not be easily pacified as the taluqdars stoutly opposed the enquiry into their rights and the abolition of transit duties. It's therefore no wonder that Jaswant Rao Holkar and his numerous emissaries succeeded in exciting a spirit of rebellion in the district of Aligarh. Nahar Ali Khan and Dunde Khan, the taluqdars of Petampur, were the first to revolt.^{viii} They held the whole of northern and north-eastern parganas, Holkar's amils held the sway over west and northwest parganas while Abhai Singh controlled Chandaus. Meanwhile, the takeover of Mathura by Holkar extended the spirit of rebellion. On 19th September 1804, in the Kol itself, an insurrection erupted which was put down in nine days after a great deal of difficulty (Hutchinson, 1856).

It was in this state of affairs that Claude Russell was posted as the Magistrate and Collector at Kol in December 1804 (Atkinson, 2010; Nevill, 1909; Hutchinson, 1856). He managed to expel the Marathas from Nohjhil and Khair while Colonel Grueber expelled Abhai Singh from Chandaus. Even then, the zamindars of the district were not brought under control, and the collector was forced to support his amils by strong armed establishments (Hutchinson, 1856, p. 16). Nahar Ali Khan's fort of Turkipora as well as his estates were confiscated by Colonel Richardson in July 1805 but Dunde Khan, because of disarming his certain forts, was exonerated and his property was made over to his son Ranmast Khan. Notwithstanding his pledge of loyalty to the British, Ranmast Khan, along with his father Dunde Khan, came out in an open rebellion and even plundered Shikarpur. Although a subsequent attempt of the British armies to capture the fort failed, Dunde Khan evacuated the fort and fled to Rajputana (Nevill, 1909, p. 180). Mardan Ali Khan, who had sided with the British government against his kinsmen, was rewarded with half the area of his ancestral Pitampur.

The Anti-British Revolts Before 1857

The district witnessed peace after the expulsion of Dunde Khan which was not disturbed until Daya Ram of Hathras and Bhagwant Singh of Mursan broke into revolt (Nevill, 1909). After the capture of Aligarh, British owing to the difficult state of affairs in the district tried hard to win over the co-operation of powerful zamindars (Atkinson, 2010, p. 413). The first thing that they did in this direction was to make settlements with big zamindars whose ability to collect revenue was unquestionable. For this reason, the entire district was handed over to 827 taluqdars of whom many did not possess proprietary rights of the land for which they were given the contracts (Hasan, 1989, p. 26). These also included Daya Ram^{ix} of Hathras and Bhagwant Singh of Mursan who were not only confirmed with the 'possession of their ancestral lands', (Atkinson, 2010, p. 430) but were also given additional lands (Hasan, 1989, p. 26). To extract revenue as well as to maintain law and order British deliberately embarked upon the policy of aiding and abetting the formation of a zamindar class. The zamindars, however, always charged revenues at exorbitant rates which proprietors failed to pay. This in turn led to the accumulation of arrears in revenue. The zamindars were, therefore, left with the two options: either to pay by selling their properties, (Hasan, 1989, p. 27) or to defy the orders completely. Daya Ram and Bhagwant Singh chose the latter. Daya Ram also refused to deliver up the four persons accused of murder which compelled Marjoribanks, the Magistrate, to cancel his and Bhagwant Singh's privilege of exemption from the police system introduced in the rest of the district (Nevill, 1909, p. 180). Matters became worse and the divisions from Kanpur, Meerut, and Mathura were ordered to concentrate on Hathras — regarded as one of the strongest forts in India (Atkinson, 2010, p. 432). On 1st March 1817, British breached the katra or fortified town, Daya Ram escaped and Hathras was taken. This had such an impact that Raja of Mursan without offering further resistance agreed to dismantle his fort (Nevill, 1909, p. 181).



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Further Research

There is always a scope of further research. Since this research is mostly concerned about the political history and here and there about the architectural history. So, there are some areas such as economic and cultural history of the period for a future researcher to trace.

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ⁱ For a detailed information about Sabit Khan see Siddiqi, *Aligarh District*, pp. 99-106.

ⁱⁱ Nevill, *Aligarh Gazetteer*, p. 170, dates it to 1754.

ⁱⁱⁱ He and Anup Gir Gosain were the leaders of the Nagas. See K. R. Qanungo, *History of the Jats: A Contribution to the History of Northern India*, M. C. Sarkar & Sons, Calcutta, 1925, p. 189.

^{iv} Peshwa's seat of power was at Poona, Sindhia's at Gwalior, Holkar's at Indore, Gaekwad's at Baroda and Bhonsle's at Nagpur.

^v 'On 28th of October 1803, statements of a proposed division into four portions of the conquered districts were submitted by the Commissioners to Lord Lake. The first portion comprised Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, and the parganas in the neighbourhood of Meerut and Hapur, containing altogether fifty-three mahals. The second portion included Khurja, Sikandarabad, Baran, Shikarpur, Dadri, Dasna, Kasna, Dankaur, Ghaziabad, Begamabad, Malikpur (Anupshahr since the time of Shah Jahan), Garhmukteswar, and some other neighbouring parganahs, amounting altogether to thirty mahals. The third portion to be attached to Fatehgarh contained Koil, including Kanka, Atrauli, Dibai, Chharra, Bhamauri, Pindrawal, Khair, Noh, Chandaus, Barauli, Murthal, and Pitampur, altogether twelve mahals. The fourth portion, to be attached to Etawa, included Firuzabad, Sadabad, Sahpu, Khandauli, Raya, Joar, Mursan, Mat, Mahaban, Hasangarh, Gorai, Husain, Tuksan, Hathras, Jalessar, Kahilganj, Daryapur, Moheriya and Sonri, or Fifteen mahals.' See Hutchinson, *Allygurh Statistics*, p. 14, Atkinson, *Descriptive and Historical Account*, p. 348.

^{vi} 'The 'Ceded Districts' consisted of three districts east of Oudh, the 'Doab' districts as far north as Etah and Mainpuri, and the Rohilkhand districts.' See B. H. Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India: A Manual of the Land-Tenures and of the Systems of Land-Revenue Administration Prevalent in the Several Provinces*, Vol. II, Clarendon Press, London, n. a., p. 4.

^{vii} 'Obtained by Lord Lake (1803), and consisting of Agra, Muttra (Mathura), Aligarh, Bulandshahr, Meerut (Mirath), Muzaffarnagar, and Saharanpur. The 'Delhi Districts' (Delhi, Gurgaon, Bohtak, Hissar, part of what was then Sirsa, and part of Karnal) were also among the 'Conquered districts' of 1803, but under circumstances created by the Mutiny, they were transferred to the



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Panjab in 1858.' Baden-Powell, *The Land-Systems of British India*, p. 4. See also B. R. Misra, *Land Revenue Policy in the United Provinces under the British Rule*, Nand Kishore & Bros., Benaras, 1942, p. 13.

viii Hutchinson informs us that this parganah had been held by the ancestors of these chiefs from the time of Shah Jahan. See Hutchinson, *Allygurh Statistics*, p. 14.

ix He was permitted to remain so autonomous that the people consider the establishment of British rule in the pargana from his expulsion. For details see Atkinson, *Descriptive and Historical Account*, p. 430.