

REVOLUTION OF 1857: MAJOR CENTERS AND PARTICIPATION OF THE WOMEN

Monika Rani

Research Scholar

Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra

Email: monumachra@gmail.com

In India the revolution of 1857, was not a sudden occurrence it was the cumulative effect of British expansionist policies, economic exploitation and administrative innovations over the years. On May 10, 1857, the “sepoys” of Meerut rebelled against the British East India Company. Very soon, others joined them under the banner of Bahadur Shah II, the Mughal emperor, to whom the rebels gave the title Shahenshah-e-Hind. The rebellion became a full-fledged uprising against the British, with kings, nobles, landlords, peasants, tribals, and ordinary people fighting together. Yet one side which is really important to discuss was the role of women in revolt of 1857. The major states of India where the women played a very crucial role were as follows :

Awadh

In Awadh, Begum Hazrat, wife of the deposed Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, took on the might of the East India Company and almost succeeded. The longest resistance to the British was offered by the begum and her trusted band of followers, Sarafad-daulah, Maharaj Bal Krishna, Raja Jai Lal and, above all, MammuKhan. Her associates included Rana Beni Madho Baksh of Baiswara, Raja Drig Bijai Singh of Mahona, Maulvi Ahmad Ullah Shah of Faizabad, Raja Man Singh and Raja Jailal Singh. She crowned her 11-year-old son Birjis Qadar the ruler of Awadh, under Mughal suzerainty, on June 5, 1857, after a spectacular victory by the rebel forces in the Battle of Chinhat. The British were forced to take refuge in the Lucknow Residency, a series of events that became famous as the Siege of Lucknow, while her diktat ran in Awadhas regent of Birjis Qadar.

William Howard Russell writes in his memoir My Indian Mutiny Diary: “This Begum exhibits great energy and ability. She has excited all Oudh to take up the interests of her son, and the chiefs have sworn to be faithful to him. The Begum declares undying war against us.” The British made three offers of truce, even offering to return her husband’s dominions under British suzerainty. But for the begum, it was all or nothing. The longest and fiercest battles of the First War of Independence were fought in Lucknow. The begum ruled for 10 months as regent and had the biggest army of any of the rebel leaders that fought the British in 1857. The zamindars and peasants who had been reluctant to pay taxes to the British gave them to her voluntarily. She fought as long as she could and finally found asylum in Nepal, where she died in 1879.

Jansi

Lakshmibai was born Manikarnikain the house of a Brahmin priest in Varanasi. She was renamed Lakshmibai after marriage to Maharaja Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi in May 1842. After her husband’s death in 1853, Jhansi was annexed by the British under Lord Dalhousie’s infamous Doctrine of Lapse, as the British refused to recognise the right to rule of Laxmibai’s adopted son Damodar Rao. Lakshmibai was forced out of the Jhansi fort and relegated to the Rani Mahal on a pension. But she was adamant that ‘main apni Jhansi nahin doongi’ (‘I will not give up my Jhansi’) and sent several appeals to England against the annexation. All her appeals were rejected. In March 1858, the British forces attacked Jhansi and were fiercely opposed. When they finally gained the upper hand, Laxmibai escaped from the fort with her son. She fled to Kalpi, where she joined Tatyia Tope. Together, they captured Gwalior. But the British gained the upper hand yet again. The fighting shifted to the outskirts of Gwalior. On June 17, 1858, during the fighting a Kotah-ki-Serai, five miles south east of Gwalior, the Rani, dressed in male attire, was shot at and fell from her horse.

JhalkariBai was part of the DurgaDal, or women’s brigade, of Jhansi. Her husband was a soldier in the Jhansi army, and Jhalkari too was trained in archery and swordplay. • Her striking similarity to Lakshmibai helped the Jhansi army evolve a military strategy to deceive the British. To elude the British, Jhalkar dressed up like her queen and took command of the Jhansi army, allowing Lakshmibai to escape unnoticed. Jhalkari gave the British quite a shock when she was caught and imprisoned. According to legend, when the British discovered the impersonation, they released her and she went on to live a long life till 1890. Jhansi, with its DurgaDal, saw the participation of many women who fought alongside their queen and sacrificed their lives for their kingdom. Some of the women we’ve found references to include Mandar, SundariBai, Mundari Bai and MotiBai.

Lucknow

One of the fiercest battles in Lucknow was the Battle in SikandarBagh in November 1857. SikandarBagh was manned by the rebels and fell along commander Colin Campbell’s route as he marched to rescue the Europeans besieged in the Residency. A bloody battle ensued and thousands of Indian soldiers were killed. A story goes that the British heard a crack shot, who was firing from atop a tree. It was only when they managed to fell the

tree that they discovered that the person shooting was a woman, who was then identified as Uda Devi from the Pasi community. Her statue graces the square outside SikandarBagh in Lucknow today. Forbes-Mitchell, in *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny*, writes of Uda Devi: "She was armed with a pair of heavy old-pattern cavalry pistols, one of which was in her belt still loaded, and her pouch was still about half full of ammunition, while from her perch in the tree, which had been carefully prepared before the attack, she had killed more than half-a-dozen men." Many African women were employed in the court of the Awadh nawabs to guard the harem. They too perished in the battles in Lucknow during 1857.

A particular feature of the great uprising was the participation not just of women from royal and noble backgrounds but of women from depressed classes too. Another dalit veerangana was Mahabiri Devi from the village of Mundbhar in the district of Muzaffarnagar. Mahabiri formed a group of 22 women, who together attacked and killed many British soldiers in 1857. The women were all caught and killed.

Kanpur

One of the most fascinating stories is that of the courtesan Azizun Bai of Kanpur. Kanpur saw fierce battles between the forces of Nana Sahib and Tyata Tope against the British. Colonial and Indian historians have mentioned Azizun's role during the battles of Kanpur. She had personally nothing to gain and no personal grudges, unlike many of the other women who had joined in the uprising. She was simply inspired by Nana Sahib. Her memory is still alive among the people of Kanpur. She dressed in male attire like Lakshmibai and rode on horseback with the soldiers, armed with a brace of pistols. She was part of the procession the day the flag was raised in Kanpur to celebrate the initial victory of Nana Sahib. Lata Singh writes in her article "Making the 'Margin' Visible" that Azizun was favorite sepoy of the 2nd cavalry posted in Kanpur, and was particularly close to one of the soldiers, Shamsuddin. Her house was a meeting point of the sepoys. She also formed a group of women, who went around fearlessly cheering the men in arms, attended to their wounds, and distributed arms and ammunition. She made one of the gun batteries her headquarters for this work. During the entire period of the siege of Kanpur, she was with the soldiers, who she considered her friends, and she was always armed with pistols herself.

Other revolutionary women

Rudyard Kipling's 'On the City Wall' refers to the anti-British activities of the courtesans during 1857. In fact, many of the courtesans' kothas were meeting points for the rebels. Post 1857, the full might of the British Empire descended on these kothas. The courtesans who had been the repositories of old culture and fine arts were relegated to the status of common prostitutes and their vast properties seized. The Muzaffarnagar area in western UP saw the active participation of women. Some of the names of the women rebels are Asha Devi, Bakhtavari, Habiba, Bhagwati Devi Tyagi, Indra Kaur, Jamila Khan, Man Kaur, Rahimi, Raj Kaur, Shobha Devi and Umda, all of whom sacrificed their lives in active fighting. According to the records, all these women, with the exception of one Asghari Begum, were in their 20s. They were hanged and, in some cases, burnt alive. There were two other queens whose kingdoms were the victims of the Doctrine of Lapse and who rose against the British. They were Avantibai Lodhi of Raigarh and Rani Draupadi of Dhar.

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