

Role of Women in India's The Revolt of 1857

**DR. SANTOSHA KUMAR
ASSO.PROF. (HISTORY)
UTTAR PRADESH RAJARSHI TANDON OPENN UNIVERSITY,
ALLAHABAD**

This great event was regarded as the foundation of its modern national liberation movement. This first step taken to liberate Bharat Mata from the clutches of the foreign yoke was termed variously by the British and the Indian historians. This gigantic challenge the British political authority in India was called a `Sepoy Mutiny` by Reverened Alexander Duff, Charles Ball, Sir John William Kaye and even by Col. G.B. Malleson. On the other hand Pt. J.L. Nehru is his book 'Discovery of India wrote 'It is much more than a military mutiny and it spread rapidly and assumed the character of a popular revolt and a war of Independence. Dr. Tara Chand too in his book, 'History of Freedom Movement' observes that it was a National war of Independence. Vinayak Damodaer Savarkar deserves the highest regard for he was the first to assess the Event of 1857 as the First Indian War of Independence. His writings which were ignore by most of the contemporary historians gave a jolt to the Britishers as well as people of India as he had high lightened the role of different regional caste community, religious leaders, reformists peasants, traders, labourers, professionals every section of society like Hindu & Muslim and also women of both the communities.

To talk of Indian women, all are aware of the fact that when given an opportunity, they gave never lagged behind in any field whether political, administrative or educational. Indian women started participating in the political agitation of the country but in the early stages of the struggle even the police was hesitant to arrest them hence the police reports are far from complete in this respect. But one should not conclude from this that the women participation in the freedom movement was negligible. In fact role played by them was quite

significant. They had also put together a great deal of courage and patriotism in the struggle for political freedom which bore vital consequences.

The first signs of unrest were felt in the first quarter of the year 1857 when the sepoys at Berhampore, Barrackpore and Ambala resorted to incendiarism. As a result the Indian regiments were disbanded and the culprits were punished, but instead of the situation being quietened the whole episode proved as a prelude to the open rebellion which followed in May. The leaders of the outbreak were both men and women. Among the women who directly entered into the conflict with the colonial power were Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rani Laxmi Bai, Rani of Ramgarh, Rani, Tace Bai, Rani Jindan Kaur and many more about whom we are going to discuss here.

The decade that preceded the outbreak had radically changed the political map of India. Lord Dalhousie had intensified the process of annexation through a vigorous application of the Policy of Lapse. During his regime almost 8 states were added to the East India Company's territorial limits. The atmosphere of the country and especially the northern India was clouded with vague suspicions. Lord Dalhousie was convinced that the British administration was better for the people than the rule of the Indian Rajas. As early as 1834, it became a powerful instrument in the hands of Dalhousie for hastening the process of political unification and administrative consolidation of the country under the British rule.

Satara was the first of the important states that escheated to the British Government in 1848. When the Raja of Satara the last lineal representative of Shivaji, died without a male heir in 1848, adopting a son when he himself was on the deathbed, without the consent of the British would not be accepted.¹

In 1853 Jhansi and Nagpur (1854) suffered the same fate as Satara,² Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi stood like a steady flame and preferred death to subjugation. She was one of the chivalrous women of India, who lived up to the grandeur of the old tradition, married at an early age of 14 to Gangadhar Rao. The Rani gave

birth to a baby boy who died after 3 months. The ruler of Jhansi fell ill in 1853 and an adoption became necessary. Hence Anand Rao, a 5 years old boy who was named Damodar Gangadhar Rao was adopted on December 19, 1853 in the presence of Major Ellis, the assistant Political agent and Major Martin, who was commanding the Jhansi contingent. Gangadhar Rao handed over a letter to Ellis⁴ with the request to get the necessary sanction of the Government of India for this adoption but instead of approval, the Doctrine of Lapse was put into force by Dalhousie. By the new terms provided to her, a pension of rupees 5000/- month was fixed for her and she was given a palace at Jhansi for her residence. She repudiated these terms and expressed dissatisfaction to Ellis as she was more interested in Jhansi than in money. She is reported to have said 'Meri Jhansi, Nahi, Dungi (I shall not surrender my Jhansi)⁶. She represented her case but was of no avail. The religious sentiments of the people were hurt by the establishment of slaughter house where cows were also slaughtered, that the rumors spread that ground bones were mixed in the flour, and cow's and pig's fat had been used for making cartridges. All this quickened the passage of revolt and Jhansi witnessed and open rebellion on June 5, 1857. The English had to take shelter in the city fort on June 6 and after this in a series of events that followed for almost a year the Rani kept rousing the zeal of her soldiers by her presence and her fiery words⁷. On 31st March 1858, 22,000 men under Tantia Tope at the request of the Rani marched against the British camp before Jhansi. Later Rani realizing her weak position cleverly escaped with her adopted son in the garb of a man. Rao Saheb, the Nawab of Banda, Tantia Tope, all assisted the Rani. Rani took interest in almost all the phases of the battle but at last she succumbed to the injuries caused by the British bullets and thus died, the bravest and the best military leader of the rebels. The Rani's determined fight and death in the battle field is an inspiration for all times to come. Malleson records: "What ever her fault in British eyes may have been her country men will ever remember that she was driven by ill

treatment into rebellion, she lived and died for her country"⁸. Major D.A. Malcolm, the Political Agent described her, as a lady who bears a very high character and is much respected by everyone at Jhansi⁹.

We here of Begum Alia¹⁰, who constituted a female espionage system and also a militia comprising of woman during the mutiny and kept torch of rebellion alive throughout Oudh for 2 years and was in regular touch with the leaders like Nana Saheb and Tantia Tope. She carried ammunition from one place to another and helped the wounded sepoys and carried food for them. This tedious task was performed by another female called Azizan¹¹, who well equipped with arms, rode on a horse and ran from place to place in the cantonment and on the streets of Kanpur, Her hatred for the English imperialism was made visible in her acceptance of the call of the Peshwa Nana Saheb on 7th June 1857, when she donned a soldiers uniform and plunged into the battle alongwith her companions, carrying a pistol and a sword she went from house to house recruiting women in the army. She also took the initiative to train these women for horse riding and in using fire arms, trained them for providing first aid to the wounded soldiers. Her woman brigade worked tirelessly under her capable supervision in collecting gun powder, bullets, food material clothes etc. For the wounded soldiers. Her faithfulness patriotism and sacrifice had also impressed Azimulla Khan the right hand of Nana Saheb Peshwa.

Another woman who fought for the cause of her nation was the wife of Raja Pratap Chandra Sing, who was popularly known as Chauhan Rani¹² of Anup Shahar a state, which was forced to accept the suzerainty of the British. But it was the courageous Chauhan Rani who lifted her head in defiance against the British and hoisted her own flag. She raised her support for the Mughal Emperor.

The next in the series was Rani Jindan Kaur¹³, who ruled over Punjab from 1843 to 1848, widow of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh a sparkling revolutionary and the first woman fighter of Punjab who proved to be a great enemy of the

imperialist British. Rani life was full of upheavels. Unless there was a statewide uprising the British power could not have been challenged. Her first attempt failed and as a consequence she was detained and sent to the impregnable fort of Shaikhupura. The Rani was maltreated hence she wanted a fair enquiry into the charges levelled against her and wrote to the resident. But far from getting justice she was sent to Benaras, from where she fled to Kathmandu where she was offered political asylum. From here the Rani got advantage of writing letters to the Maharaja of Kashmir who was in turn requested to attack the British territory. The information of Hazrat Mahal, Nana Sageb, Banee Mahadeo were also conveyed to her. She died at an early age of 44 in England but her last wish was that her bones taken back to India so that they may not rot in that inhospitable country.

Yet another female fighting for the cause of the nation was Devi Chaudharani¹⁴, whose main motive was to free her mother land from the clutches of the foreing rule. The army which she constituted included the sardars, soldiers and dacoits as she her self was their leader. Her powerful fortification was well protected her dacoit looted the English every now and then but they could do nothing in return. She thus created a lot of problems for Lord Hastings ultimately she had to fight the English Army, which she did very courageously and could not be defeated.

Rani Tace Bai¹⁵ also followed the example of her sisters. Daughter of Gopal Rao, a direct descendent of Gangadhar Govind, a former Raja of Jalaun. In 1842 the State had lapsed to the British Govt. and Rani Tace Bai, who was a claimant to the State was sanctioned a pension of 12000/- rupees per annum. She castigated her allegiance to the British authority during the uprising of 1857 Tantia Tope also favoured her and made her son sit on the Gaddi and had put a condition that she would acknowledge the Nana and pay him a sum of 3 lakh rupees to which she agreed. But it is reported that when on April 12, 1858, she

heard about the fall of Jhansi, instead of staying back to fight the English she left for Ingumpur. It is reported that she surrendered to the British¹⁶. Hamilton, who was the Agent to the Governor General reported that there was no charge against Tace Bai of ill treatment of any European or having been guilty of any atrocity. "There is no doubt that she joined the rebel party, set aside the authority of the British government and cast off her allegiance¹⁷". As a consequence of her action the British authorities decided to deport Tace Bai, her son and her husband beyond the territorial limits of Central India, she was also deprived of her pension and her jewels were sold and the money was credited to the Government Treasury.¹⁸ Tace Bai was deported to Monghyar and remained a prisoner for 12 long years before she was released the British.

We also know about the contribution of Awanti Bai¹⁹, Rani of Raja Vikramajit Singh of Ramgarh in M.P.

The British authorities in their effort of enhancing the territorial boundaries took over the management of the estates and appointed their own Tehsildar and a pension was fixed for the Raja family. The Rani rose in protest. The outbreak in Central India was a signal for the Rani to rise to the occasion and redress her grievances. Ram Garh became the fountain head of the revolt Mandala district in July 1857 and the Rani of Ramgarh its originator²⁰. Now the Rani removed the Tehsildar and took over the entire administration and as a consequence had to face the wrath of the British²¹. She was ordered to see the Deputy Collector of Mandala District which she ignored and prepared herself to fight the British by fortifying Ramgarh by erecting barricades and increasing her army strength. And finally on 1st April 1858, British forces advanced towards Ramgarh. The Rani left the fort and leading her army fought gallantly but could not resist for long and had to flee from the town and take shelter in the nearby jungles from where she continued to raid the British Camp. The Rewa rebels had joined the English²² so her position became precarious and her capture became

certain. She preferred dying an honoured death rather than submitting to the English hence after borrowing a sword from her companions she plunged it into her body. Her death proved her honesty, her honest, conviction, determination and the sanctity of her cause.

We also here of Yashwant Rao Holkar's daughter Bhima Bai Holkar²³. After his death Bhima Bai occupied the throne. When married and at her husband's place she got the information that anarchy had made its way in her father's kingdom. She approached her father's kingdom and in 1817 in her war with the English at Madidpur, got defeated. But instead of losing hope she marched towards a hilly area and settled there, attacking the English treasures and looting their military posts. Her contribution though little was important in the sense that the English were continuously getting a lesson in no situation were the Indian women weak.

In India's fight for her independence from the colonial rule we cannot overlook the contribution of **Channama Rani of Kittur**²⁴. As early as 1824 she made an aggression against the English and this she had intimated to William Chaplin, commissioner of Deccan. The letter went thus, we committed no aggression until we had been attacked by you in the first instance. We are wholly averse to war, you and the (East India Company), disregarding this feeling shows a disposition to be hostile. They fought and in 1824 itself the British power was stunned by the courage and determined resistance put forward by this Indian lady who was made a captive and given an imprisonment in Dharwar where she died on 13th July 1830 much before the initiation of the uprising of 1857.

Rani Laxmi Bai sacrificed inspired her niece Rani Tapasvini daughter of Narayana Rao a feudal lord at the fort of Belur (Arcot-South India), to participate in the revolt of 1857. She was confined in Trichinopoly. But after her release she devoted her life for the cause of female education in Bengal.

The Emperor wanted to secure the succession of a minor son named Jawan

Bakht by his queen Zinat Mahal²⁶, but he had many other as claimants to the throne. Since the heir apparent died, the Emperor under the influence of Zinat Mahal made efforts to secure the throne for jawan Bakht. In the month of may 1857 Zinat Mahal persuaded the Emperor to become the leader of the rebel forces Zinat's ambition to see her son on throne made her persuade the British authority to establish her worthy son on the throne But General Wilson could not be overpowered inspite of all her efforts. After the fall of Delhi, Bahadur Shah took refuge in Humayun's tomb from where she was taken a prisoner along with Bahadur Shah on 21st sep. 1857. She was the only queen who had accompanied the king, during his exile to Rangoon, where she died.

While, the women of Meerut were partly instrumental in accelerating action on the part of Sepoys, conditions in Lucknow a place not very far away from meerut was inspiring Begum Hazrat²⁷ Mahal to take up the leadership. As a dancing girl, christened as Mahak pari, She was given admission into the heram through her accomplishments she came very close to the king so as to become the acknowledged wife of King Wajid Ali Shah. The ruler conferred on her the title of Ifthkarul-Nisa the Pride of women and elevated her to the position of mehal. Her son was named Mirza Birjees Qadar.

The annexation of Oudh which was completed in 1856 came as a heavy blow to the Royal family, Chief and the people, Hazarat Mahal was discontented and decided to stay in Lucknow while the deposed king was banished to Calcutta Oudh came under the direct control of the British. As many as 60,000 were thrown out of employment, artisan and craftsmen lost their only mens of livelihood. Jackson the Resident at Lucknow had converd Chattar Manzil, a palace for Royal family into a residence. Qadim Rasul, a building of sanctity was converted into a storehouse and likewise many wounds were received by Oudh as a result of absorption and before the rebellion broke out at Meerut on May 10th, 1857. The banner of revolt was raised in Lucknow on 30 May 1857. The

revolution spread rapidly, the rebels were successful in establishing their authority in many places. Hazrat Mahal was an influential lady and was the primary figure in bringing about the insurrection "She has excited all Oudh" said Russell, to take up the interest of her son and the chiefs have sworn to be faithful to him"²⁸ Hazrat Mahal became the Regent Queen and exercised all authority. She ruled the state diplomatically and exhibited qualities of a good leadership and statesmanship, she was in direct contact with Nana Saheb. Hazrat Mahal escaped from Lucknow along with many people across the river Ghaghra to take refuge in the fort of Bundi in Bahraich district. She fortified the fort with heavy ammunition and men. There were a series of encounters with the British. By the time she had taken asylum in Nepal. But there too she had to face many difficulties.

After the so called mutiny or uprising was quelled the Queen of England issued a Proclamation to appease the people. She promised to respect the agreement entered into by the Company also to respect the religious rites etc. After this Begum Hazrat Mahal issued a counter proclamation challenging the truth and sincerity of the promise made by British Queen in the proclamation. She warned the people not to have faith in these promises for it is the unvarying custom of the English never to forgive a fault, be it great or small²⁹. She did not surrender to the British authorities so she was refused a pension. She wanted to come to India but due to the negative attitude of the British Government she could not come hence had to reside in Nepal permanently and died for the great cause in exile in 1879 in a land foreign to her³⁰.

Beside these prominent women of India there were several women who in their own capacity had laid their lives for their motherland. Their names are unknown. But their contribution is no less. From the above description, we can see that women who had always remained in purdah also fought for the common cause and with equal zeal. Though many of them were subjected to inhuman

torture. Not only women in the cities but also women belonging to the villages and tribes laid their lives for liberating their motherland. The elite were like a pendant in a necklace but the ordinary women were like the beads that give shape to the necklace.

Reference :

1. The Gazetteer of Indian Union Vol. II, editor: Dr.P.N. Chopra, Gazetteers Unit Department of Culture, Ministry of Education and Social Welfare.
2. Op. cit.
3. Sunder Lal (in Hindi) Bharat main Angarezi Raj, 1938, P. 1332-1454 Narratives of Events Mutiny in India, 1857-58, Calcutta, 1881, Vol. I, P.550 Lowe Thomas, Central India During the Rebellion 1857-58, London, 1860 p. 264.
4. He was sixth descent from the common ancestor Raghunath Rao I.
5. Gangadhar Rao died in 1853.
6. Arnold Edivin, the Marquis of Dalhousies Administration of British India; Vol. II, (London) 1865, p.151.
7. Forest, G.W. Selections from the letters, Dispathces and other state papers, 1857-58 vol.IVP,114.
8. Malleso, G.B. History of the Indian Mutiny 1857-58 London, 1858, vol.III,p.221.
9. Foreign political consultation No. 153-183, july 31, 1854 (N.A.I.) c.f. Manmohan Kaur, Women in India"s Freedom Struggle, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1992.
10. W. Forbes Mitchell, Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny, 1857-59, London, No. 57-58.
11. M. Thompson, The story of Cawanpore, London, 1859, P. 101, 106/G.O. Trevelyan, Cawnpore, London, 1899, P.3
12. Anoopshahar is situated 25 miles away from Bulandshahar, Bulandshahar Gazette vol. V., 1903, p. 119.
13. S.N. Sen, Eighteen Fifty Seven, Delhi, 1957, p. 358 History of Punjab, 1964pp. 537-574.
14. Instances about her are found in her biography written by Shri Bankim Chandra Chaterji and Kalyan (Hindi) 1948.
15. District Gazettes, Central Provinces, mandala District, Vol. A,p. 255.
16. Foreign Political Consultation, No. 139/47, August 13, 1858.
17. Ibid
18. Foreign Political Proceeding No. 43, February 1860
19. District Gazette, Central Provinces, Mandal Dist. Vol. A p. 255 Govt. of M.P. the History of the freedom movement, 1956, P.80.
20. Rudman, F.R.R., Central Provinces, Distt. Gazetteer Mandal Dist. Vol. A,p.255.

21. Govt. of M.P. The History of the freedom Movement (1956) P.80.
22. Ibid pp.80-81.
23. S.B. Chaudhree, Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinis, 1857-59,vol. II, Cal. 1957.
24. History of the freedom movement, Karnataka, vol.,2
25. Nattatives of Events, Mutiny in India 1857-58 Calcutta 1881. Vol. I.
26. PJO Tayor, What really Happened During the Mutiy Delhi 1997, p. 21, 161 S.N. Sen. Eighteen Fifty Seven, 1957, P.69, 70,76, 95, 96
27. J.J. Mc Lead, Lucknow and Oudh in Mutiny London, 1896,p.117.
28. Russell, Sir, W.H., My Diary in India in the year 1858-59, London, 1860,p.88.
29. Foreign political consulation No. 3022, Dec. 31, 1858 (N.A.I.)cf Manmohan Kaur op.cit.
30. Foreign political consulation No. 264, October. 1879 (N.A.I.)cf Manmohan Kaur op.cit.