

# Lost in the Annals of History: Women in the Revolt of 1857

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## ABSTRACT

*From time immemorial, women have had a significant influence on different spheres of society including politics. Their role is reflected in history as well as mythological tales. We have tales of ordinary women who achieved greatness in life in addition to the stories of queens who shaped Indian polity. Indian women made similar achievements during the colonial era, albeit often being marginalised for a variety of reasons. In this essay, an effort has been made to draw attention towards these underappreciated female figures who participated in the revolt of 1857 and whose contributions to the development of the Indian liberation struggle are as significant as their male counterparts.*

**Keywords-** *Revolt of 1957, Women freedom fighters, Azizan Begum, Awanti Bai, Nazneen*

The involvement of women in the fight for Indian independence could be traced back to the start of nineteenth-century. The name of Bhima Bai Holkar could be mentioned here, who heroically opposed the British East India Company in 1817. Later, in 1824, at the age of 33, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, the queen of the princely kingdom in the southern region of India, led an armed uprising against the British. She was among the first Indian monarchs to have mounted a fierce defense against the growing British dominance in their country. Eventually she was martyred during this endeavor. These sporadic instances of opposition became more noticeable during the uprising of 1857, which saw significant participation from women. Before we delve into the intricacies of the popular revolt a quick description of the circumstances leading up to the 1857 uprising would provide a background.

Colonel Smyth, the tough and unpopular officer in charge of the 3rd Native Cavalry, ordered a parade of his regiment on April 24 at Meerut. There was a rumor that the cartridges of the newly introduced Enfield rifle contained the fat of pig and cow. This was not acceptable to the soldiers of Hindu and Muslim communities. Only five out of ninety soldiers touched the cartridge during the parade that the colonel ordered the following morning to test the soldiers' allegiance. The march was stopped and a court martial was issued. The division commander, General Hewitt, authorised each of their sentences—all save one—of 10 years in prison for their respective crimes. The entire brigade gathered on May 9 to witness the offenders being humiliated. Their military uniform was removed and they were physically tortured.<sup>3</sup> This incident fueled a soldier's mutiny in Meerut.

The revolt in Meerut on May 10 quickly spread throughout the country's north. The revolting soldiers under General Bakht Khan arrived in Delhi on May 11 and declared Bahadur Shah Zafar to be the monarch of Hindustan.<sup>4</sup> This was done to enable the unification of the entire population under a single flag and a single leadership. However, it couldn't be accomplished as the British forces invaded Delhi and exiled Bhadhar Shah Zafar to Nepal. Following Delhi, the uprising

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<sup>3</sup> Bala, Usha, *Indian Women freedom fighters*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1986, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Holmes, T. R., *History of the Indian Mutiny*, London, 1898, p. 97.

expanded throughout north India and other regions of the nation. It quickly evolved into a popular uprising. The northwest province and Oudh were captured by rebels within a month. The British government faced a significant challenge as Delhi and Oudh emerged as the primary centers. Thus, reoccupying both centers was the British government's first priority. The governor general, Lord Canning, made the choice to occupy Oudh.<sup>5</sup> This provided the background in which the women in Meerut were preparing to join the sepoys in their uprising against the British. Actually, a variety of causes culminated in the uprising of 1857, in which the locals attempted to express their frustrations through armed uprising. For instance, the deportation of the nawab of Awadh and annexation of his territory by British in 1856 on the pretext of mis-administration did not go well with the Indian population. While the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah was exiled to Calcutta, his Begum made the decision to remain in Lucknow and assume control on her own. She contributed to the event in a way that inspired other women folk during the entire episode of the revolt.<sup>6</sup>

The insurrection, which began as a sepoys' uprising at Meerut, grew to be one of the biggest and most powerful anti-imperialist or anti-colonial uprisings in the history of the world during the nineteenth century. Millions of people belonging to different strata of the society participated in the uprising. Instead of standing apart from males on the battlefield, women joined them and some even took the initiative to lead the troops. Even British army officers expressed admiration for the role that women played in what some nationalists refer to as the "first struggle of independence." Sir Hugh Rose said of the Rani of Jhansi, "She was the bravest and best military leader of the Rebels."<sup>7</sup>

Begum Hazrat Mahal, the wife of ousted Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, opted to head the insurrection from Lucknow, as mentioned previously. Her bravery, fortitude, and tenacious resistance against the East India company became a legend. The Begum and her dependable group of adherents, Sarafan-daulah, Maharaj Bal Krishna, Raja Jai Lal, and, most importantly, Mammu Khan, provided the British with their most enduring resistance. Her other companions included Raja Man Singh, Maulvi Ahmad Ullah Shah of Faizabad, Rana Beni Madho Baksh of Baiswara, and Raja Drug Bijai Singh of Mahona.

Even though it wasn't a well-organized action, the rebels' communication network was commendable. In his book *History of the Sepoy War*, John Kayle called it "nearly electrifying." Their communication persisted even after the British had re-established themselves, as was jarringly demonstrated when Begum Hazrat Mahal, the rebel commander, issued a counter-proclamation to Queen Victoria's Proclamation shortly after the war ended. As Begum Hazrat Mahal and her followers were being pursued by British troops, the latter's movement was effectively communicated to the Begum.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these women, many others took part in this major event. Pandey Queen, Rani of Tulsipur, Rani Tace Bai, Rani Jindan, Tapasvini Maharani, Baiza Bai, Chauhan Rani, Devi Chaudharani, and Zeenat Mahal. There were many *bhatiyarins* or innkeepers, who were from the lower castes often referred to as Dalit *veeranganas* (female Bravehearts). In their inns, the rebels hatched their plans with the help of court entertainers and courtesans who disseminated news and information and even provided financial support.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Rizvi, Syed Najmul Raza and Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri (ed.), *The Great Uprising of 1857, Commentaries, Studies and Documents*, Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, 2009, p. 94.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 94-95.

<sup>7</sup> Forrest, G. W., *Selection from the Letters, Dispatches, and Other State Papers*, Vol. IV, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup> Kaye's and Malleeson's *History of Indian Mutiny, 1857-58*, Vol I, London, 1987, p. 361; Rizvi Syed Najmul Raza and Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Bala, Usha, op. cit., p. 11-12.

The distinctive aspect of this uprising is not the involvement of royal ladies, who took part in order to maintain their state, but rather the involvement of women from the lower strata of the society. Twenty-two Dalit *veernaganas* from the little village of Mundbhar in the present-day district of Muzaffarnagar formed a group under the leadership of Mahabiri Devi. These women entered the battlefield unarmed, attacked British soldiers and killed many of them. But unfortunately they were unable to hold out for very long and were soon captured and executed by the British.

One such personality was Azizan Begum. She was born in 1832 in Lucknow to Hamida Begum and Husain Khan. Later, she became a well-known singer and dancer. During the Kanpur clashes, she had a crucial role to play. She took inspiration from Nana Sahib, a famous leader of the revolt. In addition to her dancing, she was a true hero who was dedicated to his nation and actively participated in the nation's cause.<sup>10</sup> In Kanpur, Azizan resided in the Lurki Mahal palace. Azizan's mother was a prostitute who resided in Lucknow and passed away when she was a little child. She was raised at a Shatranji Palace brothel in Lucknow.<sup>11</sup> She was a student of the actress from Mirza Hadi Rusva's book "Umrao Jaan Ada." She is thought to have fled Lucknow before the uprising and travelled to Bithur (now Kanpur), where she settled. She didn't just take part in the uprising of 1857; she also inspired other dancers to join Nana Sahib. Together with them, she marched with the Indian forces into battle against the British forces.<sup>12</sup>

She left her dancing career when the uprising in Kanpur began and opted to join the rebels because she feels it is her duty to fight the enemy. According to Sir George Trevelyan, Peshwa Nana Sahib made a summons in Hindi and Urdu on June 7, 1857, urging the Hindus and Muslims to band together under his flag to defend their faith and the nation from the tyranny of the British. He exhorted them to enlist in his army and take up arms in defense of their homeland. In response to the Peshwa, Azizan put on a soldier's uniform and joined her allies in the fray. She was decked out in the distinctive uniform of her unit, and her shoulders were adorned with decorations and medals. She had a sword and a pistol with her. She inspired a number of women and enlisted them in the army. She organised a women's Brigade and instructed them in horseback riding and weaponry use.<sup>13</sup> Azizan had a close relationship with Shamsuddin Khan, a member of her second cavalry. They regularly met at her home. When the revolution started, Shamsuddin had visited her home and informed her that Nana Sahib would take over the city in two days. It appears that Azizan's home served as the soldiers' rendezvous place as a result.<sup>14</sup>

During the revolution, the women were also acting as transporters of ammunition and food from one spot to another for the sepoys. To aid her rebel army, Azizan was dashing from one location to another in the cantonment and on the streets of Kanpur while mounted and well-armed. At the fort, she was assisting the combat sepoys and injured soldiers.<sup>15</sup> Like thousands of others, we witnessed her. Azizan bravely went about encouraging the soldiers, ministered to their wounds, and distributed weapons and ammo. Her group served as unofficial messengers as well.<sup>16</sup>

Even the famous Azimullah Khan, Nana Sahib Peshwa's right-hand man, was amazed by Azizan's admiration for her loyalty and selflessness. Azizan fought valiantly and completely selflessly. She didn't care for the pomp, show, or

<sup>10</sup> Mishra, Bharat, *1857 Kee Kranti Aur Uske Pramukh Krantikari*, Rabha Publication, Delhi, 2008, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 85-86.

<sup>12</sup> Murli, Manohar Singh, Rekha Avasthi, *1857 Bagawat ke Dor Kaiteehas*, Shilpi Pvt. Ltd., 2009, pp. 268-69.

<sup>13</sup> Sabir Abhorvi, *Nawa-i-Jumun*, (Poetical Collection by Sabir Abhorvi), Faizabad, 1978, p. 102.

<sup>14</sup> Sunder Lal, *Bharat Mein Angregi Raj*, (1st edition), Triveni Nath Bajpaiomkar Press, Allahabad, 1929, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 144-145.

<sup>16</sup> *Beghumat Ke Aansu*, p.126; Usha Bala, op. cit., pp. 35-36.

opulence of the palace. Her only goal was to set the homeland free.<sup>17</sup> Azizan participated actively in the high leadership of the revolution. Tantya Tope, Nana Sahib, Azimullah Khan, and other influential people gave her their full trust. Many people provide proof of Azizan's interest in the uprising and her ability to organise her bridge. Azizan was honoured for her brave actions, as Trevelyan has publicly admitted. In actuality, she rose to legendary status. At the end of the revolt, she was produced before General Henry Havelock as a convict, he was astonished and moved by her courage and beauty. He told her "if you admit your crimes and beg for mercy I will withdraw all the charges against you."<sup>18</sup> She spurned the offer of mercy with disdain, she cried out "Nana Sahib Ki Jai." General Havelock ordered his soldiers to open fire, and the bullets pierced through her beautiful body.<sup>19</sup>

Azizan was a dancer, but the troops have a close relationship with her, as Murli Manohar Singh mentions in his book. Her affection was given to those who had a strong commitment to the nation. Her stunning grin served as a source of inspiration for the soldiers engaged in combat.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, we might conclude that she was a born soldier who fought the British during the 1857 uprising. She gave her life in the service of the nation, and her sacrifice should be remembered.<sup>21</sup>

Another personality deserving mention is Farhat Jahan. Despite coming from a wealthy family, She decided to pursue her dream of becoming a dancer. In Lal Qila, she amused crowd with the sound of her anklets. However, she was destined to play a larger part in life. During the revolt of 1857, Farhat refused to accept other women's choice to stay inside the Qila wall. Instead, she made the decision to engage in combat with the British, donning a veil and brandishing a sword. She rode up on a horse and began slaughtering the enemies. She battled until her last breath.<sup>22</sup>

Oudh also saw a number of other women rebels apart from the famous Behum Hazrat Mahal and Rani of Jhansi. The name of Azizan has already been mentioned. The name of Alia Begam couldn't be forgotten. As Rani Lakshmi Bai had put up a stiff resistance against the British during the uprising, Begam Alia also organised a group of female militia. She often gave her followers and attendants military training exercises. During a period when there was division and conflict among the Indian rebels, these women organisations acted as an efficient female espionage system. For two years, Begam Alia maintained the spirit of resistance throughout Oudh. She had gathered and arranged her military force thus showcasing her military acumen. Despite her small army size, she had to put up a valiant battle against the British soldier.<sup>23</sup> She had maintained regular contact with rebel leaders like Tatyta Tope and Nana Sahib. To the extent that her power and resources would allow, Begam passionately persisted in resisting the British.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Samiuddin, Abida, *Bharat Ki Sautantrata Sangram Mein Muslim Mahilayon Ka Yogdan*, Institute of Objective Styles, New Delhi, 1947, p. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Siddiqui, Firdaus Azmat, *1857: Emergence of India Muslim Women*, S. N. C. W. S. Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, p. 6. Also see, Quasar Kabir and Inamul Kabir, *Biographical Dictionary of Prominent Muslim Ladies*, Light and Life Publisher, New Delhi, 1882, pp. 39-42.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Singh, Murli Manohar and Rekha Avasthi, *1857 Ke Bagawat ke Daur Ka Itihas*, p. 268.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 268.

<sup>22</sup> K.S. Santha, *Begums of Awadh*, Bharti Prakashan, Varanasi, 1980, pp. 180-192; Khwaja Akram, *1857 Ki Gumnam Muslim Mahilian*, 2008, p. 265.

<sup>23</sup> Foreign Political Consolation No. 360, October 1877. Also see Shamim Bano, *Participation of Muslim Women in Socio-Cultural and Educational Activities in North India During 19th Century*, unpublished thesis, M. A. Library AMU, Aligarh 2015, p. 174.

<sup>24</sup> Shamim Bano, p. 174; Foreign Political A, 31th December 1858, National Archive of India, New Delhi.

Ibrat-Un-Nisa was another such woman who rose to prominence in the Mughal palace during the uprising. She oversaw the stores where Sirajuddin and Bahadur Shah Zafar made their appearances.<sup>25</sup> Many such contributions by Indian women could be traced during the period of the revolt. Saqina Begum was born and brought up in Farrukhabad in a reputed family of scholars. She was married to the son of Faulad Khan, one of the nobility who died fighting the British army in 1857 while serving for the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. Saqina was just 17 years old at the time. She gave birth to a child on the day her father-in-law passed away, and the English took the child from her lap. Following a 12-year search, she finally discovered her son. This highlights the inhuman steps taken by the British after their suppression of the revolt.<sup>26</sup>

Nazneen, a women of the Sayyid family tracing her lineage to the Sayyid dynasty of Delhi sultanate, was active in the revolt of 1857. She grouped with Dilawar Khan, a Pathan and took up the role of watchman of the fort as the Rebellion erupted in Delhi. She was also skilled at using a sword and firing a rifle. During one of her patrols, Nazneen discovered that someone is assisting the Britisher in installing a gunpowder pipeline at the fort's base.<sup>27</sup> When she later realised that he is no one else but his partner Dilawar Khan, she was intimidated. Idiot, for a few coins, you sold your honesty?, she said in a rage. She used her sword to attack him and kill him. Later she also died when a fire from the top of the fort hit her.<sup>28</sup>

One of India's most courageous queens, Rani of Tulsipur rebelled during the 1857 war and chose the battlefield over the comforts of a pleasant palace. She is held in high esteem in the *Terai* (foothill of Himalayas) of present day Uttar Pradesh. The northern border of Tulsipur state spanned what is now Nepal, and the southern border covered what is now India. During the 1857 uprising, the Rani of Tulsipur supported the rebels. Sir Hope Grant was sent by the British to weaken her position. Afterwards, Brigadier Rowcroft took control of Tulsipur.<sup>29</sup> Maina Devi is another figure of the period who suffered at the hands of British troops. She was the daughter of Nana Sahib. It is popularly held that she was set on fire which led to her death during the 1857 uprising. Her account chronicles British brutality during the revolt.<sup>30</sup> According to Usha Bala and Anshu Sharma, a banned book about the life of Maina Devi was published in Hindi in 1857.<sup>31</sup>

The deportation and exile of the last Mughal ruler Bahadur Shah Zafar to Rangoon (Burma) is a well-documented fact. But it's hardly mentioned that there were other members of the royalty who faced similar fate. One among them who was active during the revolt of 1857 was Mughal princess and renowned Urdu poetess Basti Begum. She was the daughter of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. She was a revolutionary woman who was exiled by the British government in 1858 A.D.<sup>32</sup>

The last king of Ramgarh Rana Lakshman Singh and his wife Awanti Bai are historical figures. The Rana died in 1850 leaving her widow to take the reins of state administration in her own hands. Later, she took active part in the revolt of 1857. She strengthened the Ramgarh fort and enlarged her army by enlisting the aid of the leaders and zamindars in the

<sup>25</sup> Qausar Kabir and Inamul Kabir, *Biographical Dictionary of Prominent Muslim Ladies*, p. 179.

<sup>26</sup> Khawaja Ikram, *San Sattawan Ki Gumnam Mhilayen*, Publication Prakashan Sansthan, New Delhi, 2008, p. 265. Also, see Shamim Bano, op. cit., p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> Qausar Kabir, op. cit., p.17. See Also Khuwaja Ikram, op. cit. p. 269. And Shamim Bano, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 269; Firdaus Azmat Siddiqui, op. cit., p. 6; Shamim Bano, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> Sen, Surendra Nath, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, Publications Division, Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1957, p. 361.

<sup>30</sup> Lal Chaman, *Martyrs of India: War of Independence*, C. Lal, 1957. P. 21

<sup>31</sup> Bala, Usha, op. cit., p. 54.

<sup>32</sup> Latif, Abdul, *Roznamcha Latif Abdul*, (Persian), Translated by Prof. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Urdu), Delhi, p. 225.

surrounding kingdoms. She led her troops to the battlefield herself when the British army moved closer to Ramgarh. Despite her valiant resistance, she lost and suffered great loss. But, the Rani never lost heart and continued to raid the British Camp.<sup>33</sup> She was a courageous lady who swung his companion's sword into her body to prevent becoming a British prisoner. She acted like a true leader in order to defend her land and its people. This demonstrates her sincerity and belief in the righteousness of her cause.<sup>34</sup>

Rani Tapasvani was another such warrior who saw action during the revolt of 1857. She was the daughter of a feudal lord Belur Narayan Rao. She was also related to Rani of Jhansi (she Rani of Jhansi's niece). She put up a stiff resistance in the face of British attack but was captured. But later she was set free by the authorities. She committed her life to studying Sanskrit and doing yoga after being freed. She established the Maha-kali Sanskrit Pathshala, a Sanskrit study center and promoted women's education as a cause.<sup>35</sup>

The above discussion aptly highlights the crucial role played by women belonging to different social stature in the revolt of 1857. Even though these women made significant contributions in the national cause, history frequently ignores and forgets about them. The article highlights the bravery and tenacity of women who fought alongside men and led armies in the uprising against the British. It is clear that these women had to overcome a number of obstacles, such as cultural expectations and the patriarchal nature of Indian society. They faced these challenges with undying dedication to the cause of freedom and their resolve to battle against injustice. Their sacrifices and contributions to the struggle for Indian independence are proof of the resilience and power of women. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge and respect the contributions made by these unsung Indian women freedom fighters. There may be a debate on the evolution of nationalism during the nineteenth century or the nature of the revolt of 1857 but there can't be any doubt on the loyalty, tenacity and sincerity of its participants towards the cause. Future generations might draw inspiration from these stories, which serve as a reminder that gender should never be a barrier to attaining one's goals and that women's contributions to society should be praised. It is our duty to see to it that their legacies are upheld and that the history of India does not forget their names.

<sup>33</sup> Bala, Usha, op. cit., p. 55-56.

<sup>34</sup> Mishra. D. P., *The History of the Freedom Movement*, Government publication, Madhya Pradesh, 1956, p. 80; Also sees Usha Bala, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>35</sup> Bala, Usha, op. cit., p. 59.