



## **THE UNSUNG LEADERS OF THE PEOPLE'S STRUGGLE OF 1857**

**DR. SUMAN SHUKLA**

Associate Professor

Department of History

Government College

Shivrajpur Kanpur India

### **Abstract:**

There is an ongoing debate about the ideological nature, scope, and purpose of the 1857 uprising. Different ideological perspectives have attempted to understand its nature and name by defining it as a military revolt, a rebellion, a revolt, a national uprising, a revolution, a people's revolution, a war fought by feudal lords and reactionaries for their own interests, or even India's first war of independence. The character of 1857 is so complex and intricate that it defies superficial analysis and simplification. Nevertheless, one thing is certain: the objective of those involved in this struggle was a single and common one: the destruction of British rule, even though the means to achieve this objective differed. Many times, we see that the reasons and motives for participation of the people and groups involved were contradictory or even fraught with contradictions, yet everyone fought together. Those fighting together were not just upper-class Hindu-Muslim feudal lords, nawabs, kings, generals, and soldiers, but also peasants, tribals, Dalits, ordinary Muslims, women, and, to a lesser extent, a large section of the population suffering under British imperialist policies. Pro-British and imperialist commentators distorted the facts of the 1857 Revolution to serve their own interests. However, for Indians, analyzing 1857 is not merely an intellectual matter but also a meaningful attempt to understand our heritage.

**Key Words:** tribals, Dalits, struggle

### **Introduction:**

Today, interpretations of history, especially 1857, continue to attempt to create a specific understanding from the perspective of marginalized people, oppressed and destitute heroes. But ironically, even today, the pioneers of struggle of 1857 the tribals, the Dalits, the women leaders, or the large sections of people who fought against the norm—have not been able to fully

register their presence in the pages of history. The rebellion was certainly started by the soldiers, but the flames of revolt soon spread from the cantonments, through cities and towns, and into villages. This was not an extension of a military revolt, but a revolt of the common people. There was not the slightest disagreement among the rebels about who India belonged to.<sup>2</sup> Mark Thornhill (*The Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate*) had a similar understanding: "When we calmly consider the question of whether the revolt was merely a military mutiny or a popular uprising, we conclude that the soldiers rebelled; the people, left to their own devices, openly acted in hostility against the government." This is a revolution, a people's revolt.<sup>3</sup> The year 1857 was the first concerted effort in Indian history to achieve freedom from slavery that was not localized at all. Soldiers and common people participated in this revolt equally. This had never happened before. Sadly, enthusiastic Indian historians have limited this people's struggle to accounts of Rani Lakshmibai's valor, Nana's diplomacy, Tatyia Tope's shrewdness, or Begum Hazrat Mahal's military prowess, neglecting the importance of the ordinary people who entered the battlefield armed with sticks and swords to challenge foreign rule, the farmers who abandoned the plow and took up arms, the ordinary women who abandoned the veil and fought shoulder to shoulder with men, and countless other people's heroes. In 1858, William H. Russell published his report on the 1857 rebellion in the form of a diary in two parts in 1860. This diary serves as an authentic source of social history. In it, he describes women who had spent their entire lives veiled, whose faces had not even been seen by the sun, running barefoot through the village streets, supporting each other in this helpless state. One such brave woman was Mahavira Devi, who came from a Bhangi family in the village of Bhaju, in the Karona tehsil of Muzaffarnagar. When the British recaptured Meerut after the Meerut Revolution, Mahavira Devi organized a revolutionary group of 22 women and fought fiercely with traditional weapons. All the brave women were martyred after killing many British. Asghari Bai of western Uttar Pradesh was burned alive by the British at the age of 20. Bakhtawari of Muzaffarnagar was also crucified. Bhagwati Devi Gujjar Bala, Habibi, Indra Kaur, Jameela of the Tyagi family - these are the names who kept the fire of revolution burning in Meerut for a long time and all of them were hanged. About 50 such brave women are mentioned in the records obtained from Muzaffarnagar.

When the fire of Meerut revolution reached Etah, the brave Dalit heroes Chetram Jatav and Ballu Mehtar gave a tough fight to the British on May 26, 1857. To crush their rebellion, the army had to be called from Agra and Mainpuri. Ultimately, the British hanged both the warriors from a tree and riddled them with bullets. In this tradition, the rebellion of Banke Chamar of Kunwarpur in Jaunpur district is also a unique example of great bravery, whom the British hanged without trial.<sup>4</sup> After the Kanpur debacle, on August 10, 1857, Uda Devi Pasi and Jagrani Devi led the attack on the British camp near Lucknow. Uda Devi was the head of the women's contingent of Begum

Hazrat Mahal. She was a brave woman; her husband, Makka Pasi, was a valiant soldier in the Nawab's army. He was martyred fighting the British. When the British army, led by Calvin Campbell, reached Sikandarbagh after winning the battle at Lucknow's Alambagh, Uda Devi led the guerrilla warfare they faced. Uda Devi had established her position on the branch of a dense tree.<sup>5</sup> Many Pasis were martyred in this battle. It was thanks to these Pasis that the revolutionary Beni Madhav Singh, a landowner of Murar tehsil, managed to escape from British captivity. Similarly, the role of Rani Rajeshwari Devi of Tulsipur, located forty kilometers from Gonda, in the 1857 Liberation War was unforgettable. When the battle broke out, she confronted a large army led by Hope Grant. When Begum Hazrat Mahal was traveling with her army to Nepal via Tulsipur and Gonda, she held back the pursuing British forces in Tulsipur until the Begum reached Nepal. The queen attained martyrdom in this battle.<sup>6</sup>

Rani Avantibai, the Lodhi ruler of Raigarh in Madhya Pradesh, personally led the army and captured Suhagpur. She also killed hundreds of British soldiers at Shahpura. However, due to the betrayal of the king of Rewa, she was surrounded by the British. Fighting like a brave woman to the end, she committed suicide with her own sword. A Sursi tribal woman from Madhya Pradesh also raised her son, Bhim, against the British. He also became a martyr. Brave warriors like the Gond tribals of Mandla and Nilambar and Pitambar of Jharkhand and Palamu remain unrecognized in the pages of history. In Bihar, the first martyr of the 1857 revolution was Pir Ali, a Pasmanda Muslim. This is not just a name; many heroic tales remain unheard. In Allahabad, weaver Liaquat Ali, who belonged to the Julaha caste, organized a group with weavers from Banaras and Allahabad and succeeded in driving out the government's well-wishers.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, after suppressing a rebellion in the Arrah district, all the citizens were accused of rebellion against the British in a bizarre trial.<sup>8</sup> These citizens, along with others like them, were suffering under British colonial rule and were fighting what official sources called "plunder." However, these official sources do not provide complete information about this "plunder."<sup>9</sup>

Mainawati of Bithoor (Kanpur) served Nana and participated directly in battle several times. In 1858, she was captured in a battle and burned alive by the just British. Gangu Mehtar, a drummer in Peshwa Nana's army in Kanpur and a master of warfare, was hanged from a neem tree in Chunniganj (Kanpur) on September 8, 1859, as punishment for his active participation in the Battle of Satti Chaura Ghat.<sup>10</sup> These are the names that are searching for their existence in national history. There are many people's leaders like Rampati, Udham Singh, Nathu Dhobi, Puran Singh, Makka Pasi, Narayan Singh, Matadin, and Ranjit Ram, whose contributions must be remembered. This requires a thorough investigation of national and district-level historical sources.

Man Singh was a peon in the British Raj. He wholeheartedly supported Rang

Babuji, and when captured, the British blew him up by throwing him into a cannon. The Dalit leader Tulsidas organized the Bhils and made guerrilla warfare a thorn in the side of the British. After the martyrdom of 250 women revolutionaries, the captured leader, brave woman Asha Devi, was immediately hanged by the British without trial. The accounts written by Moinuddin Hasan, who was the Kotwal of Delhi in 1857, also mention the contributions of women and heroic citizens from backward and Dalit castes. During the revolution in Delhi, when Charles Metcalfe tried to escape from Ajmeri Gate, he was attacked by Muslim cobblers. During the revolution, a pamphlet called *Fatah Islam* was published from Awadh. It contained this interesting quote: "Just think, earlier, the Nawabs and Kings could not even kill a single British soldier, but now the Chamars and Kalars have killed the British of the time." Though the language may not be refined, the facts reveal how active the fighting class was. One such brave woman was Jhalkari Bai. Born into a simple Kori family in the village of Bhojla, she took up a gun to defend her country, not based on religion or caste. During the rebellion, during the battle for Jhansi Fort, she fought calling herself the Queen of Jhansi so that Rani Lakshmi Bai could advance safely. She was a soldier of the Durga Dal, the women's wing of the Rani's regular army. Jhalkari Bai's bravery is still commonly discussed in Bundelkhand folk tales and songs.<sup>11</sup> Along with Jhalkari Bai, other brave women of the Durga Dal included Mandar, Sundari Bai, Mundri Bai, and Moti Bai.<sup>12</sup>

In "The Jim Crow Census," Rudyard Kipling pointed to the brothels as the center of anti-British activities in 1857. Lata Singh's article in the 1857 special issue of the *Economic and Political Weekly* (May 10-16, 2007) also provides a good analysis of this topic. Among these women, Ajijan Bai and Hussaini Begum stand out. Both played an active role during the Kanpur Revolution. Ajijan Bai was very popular among the soldiers of the 2nd Battalion stationed in Kanpur.<sup>13</sup> She distributed food and milk to wounded soldiers and was ready to selflessly support the revolution by riding a horse in male attire. Hussaini Begum was sent to Bibighar by her maternal grandfather. He was tasked with protecting the British women and children imprisoned in the Indian Army, but was killed by British General Neil during the Kanpur massacre. These facts are also confirmed by Maheshwar Dayal's book, "Delhi Jo Ek Shahar Tha."

Even today, a large section of historians consider these names to be exceptional. It is worth considering that given the social structure of the time of 1857, these heroes could only have emerged as exceptional. Consistency in logical foundations is crucial for thought and analysis. If someone, citing Tatyasaheb Tope, Lakshmi Bai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, or Kunwar Singh, says that it is not an exception that all the feudal lords, kings, or nawabs were fighting, then twenty times more names of feudal lords and kings could be cited who sided with the British. Today, the crucial task of writing history requires a discussion free from prejudice and bias. At the same time, serious research

should be conducted on the great leaders of the struggle, establishing their contributions to the anti-imperialist struggle. This requires intensive investigation at the district level, meticulous scrutiny of government documents, old government files, administrative correspondence, releases, announcements, advertisements, and archives, and a resolute will to write history. The myth that is perturbed by the universal acceptance of these leaders must be dismantled. In this century of nation-building, examining the legacy of 1857 is a historical responsibility.

**References:**

1. S.V. Chaudhuri, Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies, Calcutta, 1957; R.C. Majumdar, The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857; S.N. Sen, Eighteen Fifty-Seven, Delhi, 1957; J.W. Kaye, A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1957-58, 6 vols., London, 1976; B.D. Savarkar, Indian War of Independence, Bombay, 1947 (1st ed., 1909); P.C. Joshi (ed.), Rebellion 1857 – A Symposium, Delhi, 1957
2. Indian Renaissance and Contemporary Context, Karmendu Shishir, Raj Publications, 2013; Access Rs 9382821007A Page 27
3. Liberation War of Awadh 1857, Akhilesh Mishra, Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, 2007, p. 135
4. The History of the Indian Subcontinent, 1857-58, by Syed Najmul Raza Rizvi, The History of the Indian Subcontinent, 69, pp. 2008-2014
5. Allahabad District Gazetteer (1903-05), p. 182
6. The Unique Trial of Ara Town, Q. Ahmed, Journal of Bihar Research Society, Vol. 1, 1960
7. The Need for Alternative Sources, by Pankaj Raag, Samayik Books, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 978-981 .9080 96 . 0.3 p. 340
8. The essence of the universe is revealed by B. Narayan; 11. The Indian Constitution of India, 1857, The Constitution of India, 1857, Vol. 42, pp. 19, Veerangna Jhalkari Bai, Mohan Das Naimishrai, Radhakrishna Prakashan, New Delhi-2011, p. 86
9. The Constitution of India, 1857, Vol. 42, pp. 19, ... 2016
10. The Indian Perspective on the Indian Independence Movement in 1857. Prandeep. The Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi. 16.31 January 2016. 1857 Indian Perspective-2, Meenakshi Natarajan, Samayik Prakashan, New Delhi, 2002, pp. 555