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Jhalkari Bai : An Ignored Dalit Woman Indian Freedom Fighter

Dr. Bhanghe Prakash B.

Dept. Of English

Shri Guru Buddhiswami Mahavidyalaya, Purna (Jn.)

Abstract

With the goal of getting rid of the East India Company and the exploitation of the land, all sections of Indian society came together to get freedom from the clutches of the British colonial rule, i.e. the war of 1857 is known as the First War of Independence, a rebel against British colonial rule. And the great event left a deep mark in the history of this country. The resistance of 1857 was explained in history books, which expressed patriotism and thus promoted nationalism among the people, calling to remember the martyrs of that war. The sacrifices of the crusaders of this country deserve respect. The first names to be included in the list of martyrs of the war (1857) were: Rani Laxmibai, Taty Tope, Mangal Pandey, Tipu Sultan, Bahadur Shah Zafar and many others. But the authors mainly focused on Rani Laxmibai who was the queen of Jhansi kingdom. The place is now in Uttar Pradesh. History books present Rani Laxmibai as a strong Jhansi warrior who fought as a male king against the British. A famous phrase goes like this: "Jo khub ladi mardani wo jhansiki thi rani" (She who fought like a man was the queen of Jhansi). According to history books, she was forced to leave Jhansi when the British forces invaded the Jhansi kingdom. Like Jhansi ki Rani, other kings and fighters/rebels have been given equal importance in history, but Dalit-Bahujans have been marginalized by upper caste historians.

Key words: the East India Company, British colonial rule, war of 1857, patriotism, Rani Laxmibai, Dalit.

Introduction

A plenty of men belonging to Dalit community sacrificed their lives for Indian Independence. Besides it, Dalit women were not backside in the national freedom struggle. Some of them are as such: Kuyili, Uda Devi, Helen Lepcha, Rani Gaidinliu, Putalimaya Devi Poddar and Jhalkaribai. One of the most famous Dalit woman freedom fighters is Jhalkaribai, a legendary Dalit woman warrior from the Koli Dalit community, who played a pivotal role in what is known as the first war of Independence—the Revolt of 1857 against the colonial government.

Early life

Jhalkaribai was born to Sadova Singh and Jamunadevi on 22 November 1830 in Bhojla village near Jhansi to a Koli family. Her family belonged to the Koli caste. After the death of her mother, she was raised by her father. Jhalkari was a very brave and determined girl since childhood. Besides household chores, Jhalkari worked with animals and collected wood from the forest. In accordance with the social conditions of the time, she had no formal education, but she was trained in riding and using weapons. It is said that she once killed a leopard in the forest with a stick which he used to drive herds. On another occasion, when a

gang of dacoits attacked a merchant of the village, Jhalkari bravely forced them to retreat. Pleased with her bravery, the villagers married her off to Puran Koli, a soldier in Rani Lakshmi Bai's army. Puran was also very brave and the whole army respected his bravery.

Marriage

Puran Namapur Jhansi, himself a Koli caste, heard Jhalkari's stories of courage and bravery from his childhood. Puran was a brave and famous wrestler, skilled in archery and expert in horsemanship, firearms and swordplay. He told his mother that he wanted to marry Jhalkari. Jhalkaribai's father agreed and their marriage was solemnized in 1843. Jhalkaribai's husband was martyred defending the Puran fort, but Jhalkari, instead of mourning her husband's death, hatched a plan to betray the British. When Jhalkari bai heard this, she became a "wounded tiger" who killed many British men as a revenge.

Her Ending

After escaping Lakshimbai, Jhalkari dressed up as Lakshimbai and took command of the Jhansi army. After that, she came out of the fort to meet Hugh Rose, the British General. On reaching the British camp, she called out that she wanted to see General Hugh Rose. Rose and his men were happy not only to capture Jhansi, but also to have a living General Hugh Rose, mistaking her for a

he said that Jhalkari Bai fought with her. So queen, asked Jhalkari Bai to come to Durg. Rose was greatly impressed by Jhalkari's bravery and leadership and Jhalkari Bai was released. On the contrary, some historians believe that Jhalkari attained martyrdom during this war.

A Dalit woman freedom fighter

Dalits were not allowed to read for thousands of years and when they were given the right to read, they were taught history written by upper castes who are not interested in portraying real history and thus lose control over the masses. It should also be remembered that the content of history books is always controversial, changed and rearranged when the government changes. All governments want to promote their own versions of real history, their own heroes and gods. The result is mostly that the heroes and warriors of forgotten history are further removed and relegated to the realm of insignificance. This is what happened to Dalit life and history for decades. A large number of men belonging to the Dalit community sacrificed their lives for India's independence. Moreover, Dalit women did not return to the national liberation struggle. Some of them are: Kuyili, Jhalkaribai, Uda Devi, Helen Lepcha, Rani Gaidinliu, Putalimaya Devi Poddar etc. One of the most famous Dalit freedom fighters is Jhalkaribai, a legendary Dalit warrior from the Kori caste, who played a key role in the so-called First War of Independence - the 1857 rebellion against colonial rule. The largely neglected history of the bravery of Dalits for Indian independence has often been erased by documentation systems of upper castes and savarnas. The recent portrayal of Jhalkaribai in Kangana Ranaut's Manikarnika played by Ankit Lokhande, fails to capture her sheer courage and valour that she had exhibited in the battle against the British army.

The rebellion of 1857 is an important part of popular Dalit historical stories and also of the life of Jhalkari Bai. It is in this context that an alternative narrative of rebellion emerges that distorts the main upper caste narrative of Indian history. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 was widely regarded as the first rebellion challenging British rule in India. The reinvention of 1857 from a Dalit perspective is considered significant. Therefore, the story of Jhalkari Bai is an important part of the

Dalit reality. It may challenge the vague representations and partial/prejudiced histories of the country's social historians. The story of Jhalkari Bai, Dalit Virangana, tells us why it is important to examine the representation of Dalit women in the history of 1857. Her story defines the political and social status of Dalits in India. In 1857, the number of Dalits participating in radical armed struggles far outnumbered Dalits. The political and public memories evoked by her story symbolized the courage of the Dalit community.

Most Trusted Companion and an Advisor of Rani Laxmibai

On the occasion of Gauri Puja, Jhalkari along with other women of the village went to Jhansi Fort to greet the queen, there Rani Laxmibai was speechless seeing her as Jhalkari looked exactly like Rani Laxmibai (both were strikingly similar in appearance). Rani Lakshmibai was very impressed when she heard stories of Jhalkari's bravery from other women. The queen tells Jhalkari to recruit in Durga army. Jhalkari practiced shooting, cannon shooting and sword fighting here along with other women. That was the time when the army of Jhansi was strengthened to face any British disasters. Impressed by her abilities, the Rani of Jhansi invited her to the wing of the women of the army where the Jhalkaribai were trained to wage war against the British.

Due to the paranormal similitude that Jhalkari had with Rani Laxmibai, she disguised herself as the Queen and took command of the army on the battlefield during the Rebellion. Even after having adequate consciousness about the perils of war, she did not reconsider her decision and walked right up to the opposition's camp. In this context, looking at the figure of Jhalkari Bai becomes extremely noteworthy.

When the 1857 revolt started, the rulers were mostly interested in just saving their thrones and it was not a freedom struggle for them. It is because of her that Rani Lakshmibai escaped from the palace alive. Jhalkari Bai took on the guise of the Rani and fought the battle from Dantiya gate and Bhandari gate to Unnao gate. According to some versions, suddenly many bullets hit her, and she died. Some state that she was set free, lived till 1890 and became a legend of her time. 5th April 1857 is said to be the day when Jhalkari Bai,

disguised as Rani, fought the British and was martyred.

According to stories narrated in Uttar Pradesh, when the British came to attack on Jhansi, Jhalkari Bai was a soldier in the women's army of Queen Laxmibai and used to make decisions on behalf of the queen. She went out as a cover for Laxmibai, even confronted the enemies and saved Laxmibai's life from the British soldiers.

The legend of Jhalkari Bai remains fundamental in the popular memory of Bundelkhand over many decades. Her life as a warrior continues to be sung in various Bundeli folklores even today. Her bravery along with her identity as a Dalit has helped to create a sense of pride and cultural unity in Dalits across North India

Military service & role in freedom struggle

Due to Lord Dalhousie's policy of widening the kingdom, the British did not allow the childless Lakshmibai to adopt an heir, as they wanted to bring the kingdom under their control. However, in protest against this action of the British, the entire army of the Queen, her generals and the people of Jhansi rallied with the Queen and instead of surrendering, they resolved to take up arms against the British.

In the queen's army, Jhalkari Bai quickly rose in the ranks and began commanding her own army. During the Rebellion of 1857, General Hugh Rose attacked on 23 March 1858 Jhansi with a large army. The queen faced the army with 14,000 of her troops. She waited for relief from Peshwa Nana Sahib's army camping at Kalpi that did not come because Tatya Tope had already been defeated by General Rose. Meanwhile, Dulha Ju, in charge of one of the gates of the fort, had made a pact with the assailants and opened the doors of Jhansi for the British forces. During April 1857, Lakshmibai led her army from within the fort of Jhansi and repulsed several attacks by the British and their local allies. Dulherao, one of the queen's generals betrayed her and opened a guarded gate of the fort to the British army. When the fall of the fort became certain, the generals of the queen and Jhalkari Bai advised him to leave the fort and run away with her son and some soldiers attendants to Kalpi. Upon hearing of Laxmibai's escape, Jhalkaribai set out for General Rose's camp in disguise and declared herself to be the queen. This

led to a confusion that continued for a whole day and gave the Rani's army renewed advantage.

In this way, Jhalkaribai kept fighting calling herself a queen and General Rose's army also started attacking Jhalkaribai considering her as the queen. But at the end of the day they came to know that she is not the queen.

The legend of Jhalkari Bai remains fundamental in the popular memory of Bundelkhand over many decades. Her life as a warrior continues to be sung in various Bundeli folklores even today. Her bravery along with her identity as a Dalit has helped to create a sense of pride and cultural unity in Dalits across North India.

Legacy

Jhalkari Bai's role as an Indian warrior in the Rebellion of 1857 during the battle of Jhansi is significant at many levels. The literature surrounding Jhalkari Bai reveals a world that challenges textual, academic and historical narratives of 1857. It further shows how resistance to dominant discourses about Dalit women is an integral part of the lives of various Dalit women and Dalit communities.

Jhalkari Bai's contribution has not been greatly elaborated upon by mainstream historians, but modern writers have raised her from obscurity. Jankavi Bihari Lal Harit composed the poem 'Veerangana Jhalkari'. Harit summed up Jhalkari's bravery as follows:

Lakshmi Bai's sharp look, Jhalkari Khadag went on. Heroine in fearless army, weapons and body edged ||

Shri Mata Prasad, the Governor of Arunachal Pradesh (from 21-10-1993 to 16-05-1999) has composed the biography of Jhalkari Bai. Apart from this, Chokhelal Verma has written a large poem on his life, Mohandas Naimisrai has given a book shape to his biography and Bhavani Shankar Visharad has scripted his biography. Rashtrakavi Maithilisharan Gupta has lined up Jhalkari's bravery as follows -

There was a challenge to go to the battle, it was a glimpse of Jhansi.

Taught to fight with whites, is reflected in history. She was a woman of India only.

Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi.

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Various authors have written stories and poems on Jhalkari Bai. The kind of cultural invocations include comics, poems, plays, novels, biographies, nautankis, and even magazines and organisations in her name. To name just a few, there is the comic Jhalkari Bai; poems variously titled Virangana Jhalkari Bai Kavya, Jhansi ki Sherni: Virangana Jhalkari Bai ka Jeevan Charitra and Virangana Jhalkari Bai Mahakavya; plays and nautankis called Virangana Jhalkari Bai and Achhut Virangana Nautanki; novels and biographies like Virangana Jhalkari Bai and Achhut Virangana; and a magazine called Jhalkari Sandesh. Various Dalit magazines have published articles on her.

In appreciation of Jhalkari Bai, the General of the British Forces Hugh Rose on meeting her had said, "If even one per cent of Indian women were like Jhalkari; the British would soon have to leave India."

Jhalkari Bai's birthday is celebrated in Uttar Pradesh as Gaurav Diwas, (Day of Pride) but is ignored by the mainstream Brahminical academia and media.

The death anniversary of Jhalkaribai is celebrated as Shahid Diwas (Martyr Day) by various Koli organizations. The movement to establish Bundelkhand as a separate state has also used the legend of Jhalkaribai to create the Bundeli identity. The Archaeological Survey of India is setting up a museum at Panch Mahal, a five-storey building located inside the Jhansi Fort in remembrance of Jhalkaribai.

Jhalkari Bai's saga even today in Bundelkhand can be heard in folklores and folk songs. The Government of India issued a postage stamp in honor of Jhalkari Bai on 22 July 2001, her statue and a memorial are in Ajmer, Rajasthan, a statue of her has been installed in Agra by the Government of Uttar Pradesh, as well as her A charitable hospital has also been started in Lucknow named.

She is referred to in the novel Jhansi ki Rani written in 1951 by B. L. Varma, who created a subplot in his novel about Jhalkaribai. He addressed Jhalkaribai as Koli and an extraordinary soldier in Laxmibai's army. Ram Chandra Heran Bundeli novel *Maati*, published in the same year, depicted her as "chivalrous and a valiant martyr". The first biography of Jhalkaribai was written in 1964 by

Bhawani Shankar Visharad, with the help of Varma's novel and his research from the oral narratives of Kori communities living in the vicinity of Jhansi.

Badri Narayan (2006, p. 119) mentions "Today, the Kolis, like other Dalit castes, use the myth of Jhalkaribai for the glorification of their community. They also celebrate Jhalkaribai Jayanti each year to enhance their self respect and elevate the status of their caste. It is a matter of great pride that she was a Dalit Virangana (brave woman warrior) born in the Koli caste and they highlight this dimension while recounting her brave deeds."

Former President Ramnath Kovind unveiled the statue of Jhalkari Bai at Guru Tegh Bahadur Complex in Bhopal on 10 November 2017. *Manikarnika* (2019), a Hindi film starring Ankit Lokhande as Jhalkaribai has been made.

Conclusion

The greatness of Jhalkaribai is remembered for years in the memory of Bundelkhand. Not only Bundelkhand but the whole of India will always remember his life and especially her art of fighting with the East India Company. His greatness as a Dalit greatly influenced the lives of Dalits in northern India. Later Jhalkaribai was hanged by the British after some time. Her name is said to be the honor and pride of Dalits. In view of this, a lot of research was done on his life and some interesting facts were also found about her life. But most of the time Jhalkari Bai has been called the historical heroine of Dalits.

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