

BELLES ON FIRE: UNSUNG HEROINES OF 1857 DID CLASS CONFLICT ENGENDER THEIR OBLIVION FROM HISTORY?

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Abstract: The paper sources secondary data to research the role of three unsung heroines of the First Battle of Indian Independence and reveals their contribution and probes the reason for their neglect by historians. The fact that all three belonged to the underprivileged sections of society may have influenced their non-inclusion by historians as engendered class divides in Indian society may have dominated their exclusion from history even as Begums and Queens who raised their voice against the annexation of their kingdoms have been given enviable positions and hailed as heroines by historians and historiographers alike.

Keywords: Azizun, Class Conflict, First War of Indian Independence, Husainee, Mutiny of 1857, Sniper of Secunderbagh (Sikanderbagh)

Introduction:

“We of the bazaar lead the world by the nose.”

—Flora Annie Steel, *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900)

History per se is written by the victors and as a discourse has emerged as an important document of contestation, especially for those in the margins. The saga of the Indian freedom struggle is not without tales of “heroic” women lauded for their contribution towards the Indian freedom struggle especially the First Battle for Indian Independence that shook the British Empire, especially in the Kingdom of Oudh in the wake of the ouster of the last King of Awadh, Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and his departure to Matiaburj near Kolkata. However what is under scrutiny here is the role and treatment of women in the freedom struggle hailing from different class segments of society.

Begum Hazrat Mahal: The Begum of Oude or, Begum Hazrat Mahal, and Rani of Jhansi give more than ample competition to their male counterparts like Nana Sahib, Tantya Tope, Kunwar Singh, Mangal Pandey and others. Oude was an independent kingdom till the British annexed and destroyed it in 1856. Wajid Ali Shah is rumoured to have sixty wives and concubines from whom he fathered seventy-two children. His zenana was protected by a specially trained regiment of Amazons who would allow no male other than the king to enter its confines. At the time of his journey to Matiaburj in Kolkata in 1856, Wajid Ali Shah took only a few of them with him, leaving most, including the young Begum Hazrat Mahal, mother to his 9-year-old son Birjis Qadr behind. Hazrat Mahal seems not to have resented this. In the background of the Indian Mutiny in July 1857 and the people’s revolt against British yoke in Oude, the rebels gave Hazrat Mahal and her son an opportunity to rule supreme. However in March 1858 the British launched their final attack on Lucknow and the Begum was forced to flee to the hills in the Terai, beseeching Jang Bahadur of Nepal for help. Her

refusal to surrender made her an admirable force in the eye of a storm and *The Times* London chronicled her history. At the end of 1858 it was saying, “Like all the women who have turned up in the insurrection, she has shown more sense and nerve than all her generals together.” The fact that she never did surrender but died in 1879 in Nepal made her an enigmatic figure in the eyes of her opponents. The Dictionary of Indian National Biography has hailed Hazrat Mahal as the “*Heroine of the First War of Independence*” and to many Indians she remains that till date.

Laxmibai, Rani of Jhansi: Born Manikarnika and renamed Lakshmibai in 1842 after her marriage to the Maharaja of Jhansi, Raja Gangadhar Rao Newalkar, in May 1842 she was the queen of the Maratha-ruled Jhansi State, situated in the north-central part of India. Hailed as one of the leading figures of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 she became for Indian nationalists a symbol of resistance to the British Raj. Since her own first born died soon after birth, the Maharaja adopted a child, christened Damodar Rao. After the death of the Maharaja in November 1853, because Damodar Rao was adopted, the British East India Company, under Governor-General Lord Dalhousie, applied the *Doctrine of Lapse*, rejecting Damodar Rao’s claim to the throne and annexing the state to its territories. From August 1857 to January 1858 Jhansi under the Rani’s rule was at peace. The British forces led by Sir Hugh Rose demanded the surrender of the city; if this was refused it would be destroyed. Sir Hugh Rose besieged Jhansi on 23 March 1858. The Rani withdrew from the palace to the fort. According to folklore, with Damodar Rao tied to her back she jumped on her horse Badal from the fort and escaped in the night. On 17 June a squadron of the 8th (King’s Royal Irish) Hussars, under Captain Heneage, fought the large Indian force commanded by Rani Lakshmibai. According to an eyewitness account, Rani Lakshmibai put on a sowar’s uniform and attacked one of the hussars; she was also wounded, probably by his sabre. Shortly afterwards,

as she sat bleeding by the roadside, she recognised the soldier and fired at him with a pistol, whereupon he "*dispatched the young lady with his carbine*". According to another tradition Rani Lakshmbai, the Queen of Jhansi, dressed as a cavalry leader, was badly wounded; not wishing the British to capture her body, she told a hermit to burn it. After her death a few local people cremated her body.

Both ladies, Begum Hazrat Mahal and Rani Laxmibai are hailed as great leaders and freedom fighters, when, if one views their role with a critical eye, it can easily be gauged that they were fighting individually to retain their kingdoms and sovereignty. However in the annals of Indian history, they are true heroines of the First War for Indian Independence.

Little or nothing at all is said of some other heroines of the freedom struggle, lesser known and glossed over, though their role is as significant if not more, when viewed under the microscope of selfless contribution.

Azeezun or Azizun-nissa: Azizun, a courtesan from Cawnpore used her *Kotha* as an information gathering centre from the British sepoys who frequented it, and who is known to have raised arms against the British. She was caught, tried and hanged for her role in stoking the Mutiny of 1857.

The accounts of Azizun are sourced from the painstaking evidences recorded by Colonel Williams during his investigations in 1858 of what actually happened in May-August 1857 which led to the people's mutiny against British yoke. Among his documentations are accounts from a lawyer Nanuk Chand who kept a meticulous diary throughout the tumultuous period, statements given by Kunhya Prasad, a *mahajan of Cawnpore*. Azizun lived in the Lurkee Mahil, in Oomrao Begum's house in Kanpur. Her mother was a courtesan in Lucknow. It is said that she was born in 1832, left motherless when very young, and brought up in the house of a courtesan at Satrangi mahal, Lucknow. Azizun left Lucknow, a centre of culture, where the courtesans enjoyed patronage, and came to Kanpur where she began to run a *kotha*. Azizun was very close to the sepoys of the 2nd cavalry, many of whom visited her house. She was particularly close to Shamsuddin Khan, a sepoy of the 2nd cavalry who played an active role in the Rebellion. Meetings of the rebels took place at his house. Shamsuddin used to visit Azizun frequently. In most accounts it is mentioned that two days before the Rebellion began in Kanpur, Shamsuddin had gone to Azizun's house and told her that Nana Sahib would be the Chief in a day or two and after that her house would be filled with gold mohurs. Azizun's house was also the meeting point of sepoys. She had formed a group of women who went around fearlessly cheering the men in arms, attended to their wounds and distributed arms and ammunition. Azizun made

one of the gun batteries her headquarters. One of the eyewitnesses mentions that it was always possible to see her armed with pistols – in spite of the heavy firing – amongst her friends, who were the cavalymen of the 2nd regiment. Nana Sahib and Azimullah Khan (leaders of the rebellion) both seemed to have known Azizun. She may have been aware of the planning of the Rebellion and may have been one of the key 'conspirators' of the Rebellion. The British officials were aware that their *kothas* were meeting points where the Rebellion was planned. Consequently, the *kothas* were looked upon with suspicion as sites of political conspiracy. In fact, the role of the courtesans in the Rebellion of 1857 can be best judged from the ferocity of the British retribution that was directed against some of these women. It included large scale appropriation of their property.

Her confidant was Shamsuddin, a frustrated Indian serving in the British cavalry. He was tired of serving his invaders for no purpose other than monetary security. This built up frustration inside him and the fact that he was of no help to the general Indian public was fuelling within him. He developed an intense hatred for the British command, a sentiment that found companionship with the ideas of Nana Sahib and the other strategists of the revolt. This growing urge to rebel was catalyzed by Mangal Pandey's historic mutiny in Barrackpore. Kanpur joined the upheaval and Shamsuddin plunged into the fire.

Azizun's thoughts were being influenced by the stories Shamsuddin brought to her while dealing with the British excesses on Indians. The frustration inside him began resonating inside her conscience as well and she felt the hatred and disgust and empathized with what the Indian soldiers. Her thinking began to be swayed slowly away from the glamorous and the shielded environment that she had grown up in and was accustomed to, towards something that seemed a lot more meaningful- her freedom, her people's freedom. Her thoughts ultimately took shape and she joined the revolt as a soldier. She wore male attire and adorned all the weapons that the men did. She behaved as a warrior now. Her present had severed all connections with her past. Azizun was the only woman present at the unfurling of the Indian flag against the British rule at Kanpur—that too in full fighting armour on a horseback, ready to fight for her people and to justify the strong unfailing belief that had changed who she was, forever.

Azizun fought fiercely in battle and wielded her sword as competently as any other soldier. After the fall of Kanpur, she was finally caught, tried for her role in the uprising against the British and brought before Sir Henry Havelock who was so struck by her comeliness that he could hardly believe what she was

accused of. Undaunted, and fearless, Azizun went to her end bravely and in face of a firing squad, is known to have said, "*I stand committed to destroy the British lock stock and barrel.*" She is known to have gone to her death chanting, "*Nana Sahib ki Jai*"

Husainee Khanum: The documentation of Colonel Williams investigations in the wake of the Mutiny of 1857 are irrefutable evidence incriminating Husainee the slave girl responsible for the massacre of over 200 women and children. These survivors of the horrific Satichaura ghat massacre on the Ganga ghat on 30th June were taken first to the Savada (Salvation) kothi and later to the Bibighar kothi (house of the ladies) and subsequently butchered. A slave girl Husainee, was implicated for ordering the massacre of the British women and children held captive in Bibighar kothi. Their brutal massacre was crucial to the British assault to relieve the siege of Lucknow and end the first concerted effort to rid the country of foreign rule.

During their confinement in Bibighar kothi, they were attended to by a "Begum" of Nana Sahib. According to testimony of a Christian drummer John Fitchett, who survived the Mutiny by converting to Islam, the "Begum" was in charge of the welfare of the British women and children at Bibighar kothi and it was she who had ordered their death. It was deduced that the "Begum" was in fact Husainee, a slave girl, one of four, belonging to Nana Sahib's father Peshwa Baji Rao. She was an attendant to a courtesan named Aula or Sultana Adala, a keep of Nana Sahib. She was at the height of her power in June/July 1857 as a favourite of the Nana. Husainee, her slave girl, is described as "fair, tall and around 26-28 years of age." Accounts of Mr Shepherd, an Anglo-Indian government employee who survived the massacres state "*the Nana did not go to witness the slaughter on the banks of the river but stayed in his tent throughout the incident.*" He is said to have experienced "*compunctions of conscience at the treachery that was about to be enacted*" saying he had taken a solemn oath to allow the English to leave in safety, and therefore would not accord his consent to their slaughter. The foul deed is said to have been done at the behest of Nana's younger brother Bala Sahib backed by Azimullah Khan and Muslim soldiers of the 2nd Cavalry.

Thus if Nana Sahib was unwilling to order the killing of British men at the Satichaura ghats, he was less likely to order the merciless butchering of over 200 women and children at Bibighar kothi. Colonel Williams's investigations lifted the veil from the identity of the "Begum" who ordered the massacre of the women and children at Bibighar kothi. Husainee, alias, the "Begum" was placed in charge of the ladies while they were still in Savada kothi. They were in a poor physical condition and made no attempt to

escape, probably knowing it would be futile to try to break the cordon of sepoys surrounding them. Husainee displayed animosity towards them from the very beginning and tried to increase their fears and discomfort. They were given a staff of sweepers to assist them and unleavened dough and lentil porridge for meals. Each day two among the ladies were taken to the Nan's stables where they were forced to grind corn on a hand mill for several hours at a stretch.

Nana evinced no interest in their welfare at first but had to intercede on humanitarian grounds when he heard that as many as 25 were dying in a week. Orders arrived for better food and medical care to be given to them and that they be attended by a native doctor. They were also taken outside their stifling room in which they were confined to take in sun and fresh air. This was however resented by the ladies as they became a sight for public curiosity and ridicule at the hand of the masses.

Meanwhile the British had launched a huge offensive to relieve the Residency and lift the siege of Lucknow. On 12th July Bala Sahib, Nana Sahib's brother was heavily defeated by Havelock at Fatehpur and returned badly wounded and crushed to Nana Sahib. On 15th July 1857 at around 4 pm orders came to the guards at Bibighar to shoot down the male prisoners. There were five of them—two Colonels and a magistrate from Fathgurrh, Mr Greenway, a merchant, and his 14-year-old son. The sepoys had no compunctions in obeying these orders and they were killed without much ado.

One of the ladies asked the Jumadar carrying out the order if they were to be killed too, which he denied and said Husainee Begum's "*orders would not be obeyed.*"

Some say the sepoys poked their muskets through the windows in a token obedience of orders and fired at the ceiling. All accounts point towards the fact that the sepoys "*refused to comply with orders received.*"

At 5 pm the same day Husainee Begum returned with five men. The sepoys did nothing to stop the five armed men from entering Bibighar kothi, though their murderous intent seemed obvious, armed as they were with heavy "*chapads*" (meat cleavers). Two were Hindu peasants and two Muslim butchers from the bazaar. The fifth, Sarvar or Sirdar Khan, wore a red uniform of the Nana's bodyguard and was Husainee's lover. The five men entered Bibighar and the butchering began. They left at dark after the house had fallen silent. They returned in the morning with a few sweepers who dragged out the bodies and threw them into the well, some still alive but badly wounded. It was 16th July. Sir Henry Havelock entered Cawnpore a few hours later—a few hours too late.

Husainee Khanum was never found. It was reported to Colonel Williams that "*she who distributed the food to the ladies is now (1858) with the Nana,*" and she is

assumed to have fled with Nana Sahib to the Terai and died of fever with him.

Unknown sniper of Sikanderbagh: Last but not the least is the tale of the Unknown lady sniper of Sikanderbagh who effectively ambushed and killed several British soldiers, part of Sir Colin' Campbell's forces sent to relieve the Residency, while they rested under a Banyan tree, firing from above. A statue in her memory has been erected at the crossing and she has been given the name "Uda Devi" by some politicians keen to claim her as from their own community. W.F Mitchell relates in his *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny 1857-59*: In the center of the inner court of the Secunderbagh there was a large peepul (*Ficus Indica*) tree with a very bushy top. Round the foot of which were set a number of jars full of cool water. When the slaughter at Secunderbagh was nearly over many of the British soldiers went there to quench their thirst. A number however lay dead under this tree and the many body lying in that spot in a particular manner attracted the attention of British Captain Dawson. He noticed that all the men had been shot from above. He called upon his comrade Quaker Wallace to look up and see if he could perceive anyone at the top. Wallace loaded his rifle and carefully scanned the top. Perceiving some movement he took aim and fired. Down fell a body dressed in rose trousers and a tight fitting red jacket, which bursting open with the fall, revealing it was a woman this was the dress of the Abyssinian guards of Wajid Ali Shah's parikhana. She was armed with a pair of heavy old-pattern cavalry pistols. She had killed over half a dozen men. When Wallace found it to be a woman he exclaimed, "If I had known it was a woman, I would rather have died a thousand deaths than have harmed her." As far as the legend goes she was one of the female bodyguards of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. She was fiercely dedicated to her master. Historians believe she was a Pasi lady, who fought side by side with the besieged mutineers. Trained in martial Arts and espionage she also learned the art of guerrilla warfare and fought with her gun till the last bullet. The British were also surprised and stunned by her marksmanship until she was spotted by the soldiers, who fired relentlessly at her till she attained martyrdom.

Conclusion: Dastardly though these tales may be, the fact remains that all three ladies took up arms against the British without having any personal gain when compared to Rani Laxmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal whose battle was to retain/regain control of their rule and as such, had their own selfish motives to be a part of a struggle against the *feringhee*.

Courtesans of Oude played an important role in the Rebellion of 1857. One of the influencing factors was their close association with nawabs, who were their

chief patrons. However the advent of British power marked the erosion of the cultural power of the courtesan. British rule had marked the loss of the protection and patronage of the royal courts, their main patrons. The British government overlooked their artistic and creative element by equating their *kothas* with brothels.

According to Veena Talwar Oldenberg "These courtesans appeared in other British colonial records as well. They were the subject of frequent official memorandums written in connection with a grave medical crisis that engulfed the military establishment in Lucknow, as well as in all the major cantonments in British India. A greater number of European casualties during the mutiny and rebellion of 1857, it was discovered, were caused by disease than in combat. The shock of this discovery was compounded by the embarrassing fact that one in every four European soldiers was afflicted with a venereal disease. It became clear that the battle to reduce European mortality rates would now be joined on the hygienic front, to ensure a healthy European army for the strategic needs of the empire. It became imperative that the courtesans and prostitutes of Lucknow, along with those in the other 110 cantonments in India (and in several towns in Britain) where European soldiers were stationed, be regulated, inspected, and controlled.

After the Mutiny, there was a conscious move to put an end to the influence of the courtesans. Strict regulations were enforced through Britain's Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 that were incorporated into a comprehensive piece of legislation, Act XXII of 1864 in India; which required the registration and periodic medical examination of prostitutes in all cantonment cities of the Indian empire."

Veena Talwar Oldenberg further avers, "The British usurpation of the Kingdom of Awadh in 1856, and the forced exile of the king and many of his courtiers, had abruptly put an end to royal patronage for the courtesans. The imposition of the contagious diseases regulations and heavy fines and penalties on the courtesans for their role in the rebellion signaled the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution. Women who had once consorted with kings and courtiers, enjoyed a fabulously opulent living, manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends, been the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends, were left in an extremely dubious and vulnerable position under the British. 'Singing and dancing girls' was the classification invented to describe them in the civic tax ledgers, and encapsulates one of the many profound cultural misunderstandings of "exotic" Indian women by colonial authorities."

Perhaps, the past needs to be excavated to recover the voices of women. This negotiation becomes especially necessary when it comes to Azizun and Husainee. From humble backgrounds, they were considered to be 'coarse', 'vulgar', 'loud', 'morally degraded' and 'sexually promiscuous'. These women had greater access to the public sphere and were relatively independent. Thus, they were outside rigid formations and not so clearly contained by the established order of caste, class and gender, or a demarcated space. As a result, they were considered 'subversive' and posed a threat to the established order. In fact, locating these women as subjects of history shakes the terra firma of the respectable order of the middle class. It is perhaps this reason that accounts for the invisibility of these women from the history of the 1857 Rebellion. Nationalist writings have negated or erased their creative aspect by excluding them from the framework of the respectable 'nation'. After all, the representation of women as public entertainers and the locus of male desire did not serve the interests of the English-educated elite.

Compounding the silence of these women has been the silence of scholars and historians. This has meant the erasure of a profession, with which many public women were involved, from history. Ironically, these women have remained invisible even in the writings of feminist scholars.

It is important to relate these women and their role not just as per their place in a historical context but also assess their contribution to the freedom struggle in the larger framework of women and gender studies. What was it that prompted a courtesan, a slave girl and a common soldier of Wajid Ali Shah's *parikhana* to join in the struggle to gain freedom?

There are several contributing factors that conspired to keep these women largely "invisible" from the annals of history. As historian Veena Talwar Oldenberg states in her 2011 paper titled *Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow*, "Traditional constructs of class and class struggle are far removed from the arena of gender relations and the courtesans' style of reversing an oppressive order. One does not use a hammer to prune a rose bush. Women's struggle obviously cannot be a "class

struggle;" for the gender divisions are vertical, not horizontal, and cut through class lines, so the validity of the courtesans' struggle cannot be refuted on the grounds that it is engaged in at a private, unobtrusive level."

Describing the status of the tawaifs in Lakhnavi society, Oldenberg states, "The courtesans' life-styles subvert the hierarchies of caste and class, because in both groups lower caste and economically disadvantaged persons find refuge. The tawa'if have created a secular meritocracy based on talent and education, accepting Hindus and Muslims alike. They too, like the ascetics, hold positions of respect by the society at large, and both countercultures exist by maintaining vital links to the overarching patriarchal culture, while consciously inverting or rejecting its values."

The cultural identity of the courtesans was adversely undermined during the colonial period. They were subjected to medical laws (like *Britain's Contagious Disease Act of 1864*) and bracketed with the prostitutes, in order to 'control' venereal disease afflicting the European soldiers.

Partha Chatterjee in his essay, *The Nation and its Women*, has argued that the inner (domestic) domain of women became invested with the urgency of preserving the sanctity of national culture. At the same time the nationalist discourse was trying to purify itself of bad influences like the courtesan women.

The nationalist movement found its early expressions in the form of social reform programmes, such as the anti-*natch* campaigns, through which the richly diverse and stratified group of courtesan women was reduced into a homogenous group which was a threat to the well-being of the society. Little wonder then that it did little to provide a name in history and their rightful place in the annals of the First War of Indian Independence to these three ladies who remain unsung heroines till date.

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