
“WOMEN FIGHTER & HER CONTRIBUTION IN THE REVOLT OF 1857-58 WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO BEGUM HAJRAT MAHAL”

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INTRODUCTION :-

The upheaval of 1857-58 was the first of its kind in the sense that it was the first organised armed attempt on the part of Indians to free themselves from the political grip of the English. The period was one of great tribulation for the Indians & the English alike because the fate of both experienced such convulsions as would make the History of the country. The British emerged victorious in the end but the Indians gained too in the sense that the movement became a symbol of strength & sacrifice for the subsequent generations.

The decade preceding the outbreak had been a period in which the political map of India was radically changed. Lord Dalhousie had intensified the process of annexation through a vigorous application of the policy of lapse. The years of his regime (1848-56) saw the absorption of nothing less than eight states which meant that a quarter million square miles of territory was added to the east India Company's territorial limits. The period also witnessed the missionary activities against early marriage, pardha system, the passing of the widows Remarriage Bill in 1856. The atmosphere of the country and more especially of northern India was clouded with vague suspicions. The people now felt confirmed in their faith that the British authorities were not satisfied with mere annexation of their states but wanted to interfere in their religious affairs & end their caste system.

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The first signs of the unrest were felt in the first quarter of the year 1857. When incendiaries became a common practice with the sepoys at Beharmpur, Barrakpur & Ambala. The Indian regiments were disbanded and the culprits were punished. This however did not quieten the situation and proved only a prelude to open rebellion which followed in May. The leaders of the outbreak were both men & women, most important amongst the latter being Begum Hazrat Mahal , Rani Laxmi Bai, Rani of Rsmgarh , Rani Tace Bai , Maina Bai, Rani Chennamma (Kittur, Karnataka), Begum Auliya & Amani Bano Begum .Some of them led troops to the battlefield & fought , while others accepted the sufferings & prevention, imprisonment & death.² It was on 24th April 1857 that c. Smyth, commandant 3rd light cavalry ordered a parade to test the loyalty of the soldiers, at Meerut out of ninety sepoys present, 85 refused to accept the cartridges.³ It was the morning of 11th May 1857. The city of Delhi had not yet woken up when a band of Sepoys from Meerut, who had defied & killed the European officers the previous day. Crossed the Jammu, set the toll house on fire & marched to the Red fort. They entered the red fort through the raj Ghats gate, followed by an excited crowd, to appeal to Bahaddur shah II, the Mughal Emporor , a pensioner of the British East India Company , who possessed nothing but the name of the mighty mughals to become their leader ,thus give legitimacy to their cause .Bahaddur Shah ,vacillated as he was neither

same of the intentions of the sepoys nor of his own ability to play an effective role .He was However pursued, it not coerced to give in & was proclaimed the Shaenshah-E-Hindusthan.⁴

The sentence thus passed was announced on May 9th 1857 in the presence of a large number of people with an aim to create a kind of concentration in the minds of others. The Sepoys were deprived of their uniforms & then were handed over to the smiths for fastening shackles round their arms & legs.⁵ The sight might have been picture space for the English commander but that the whole affair was distasteful & disagreeable to the Indians assembled, there is no doubt. There was a good deal of murmuring in our ranks says wough and had it not been for the presence of the British troops it is impossible to say what might not have taken place.⁶ Later in the evening the women of bazaar jeered at the sepoys and taunted them in humiliating terms. ***Your brethren have been ornamented with these anklets & incarcerated and for what?*** Because they would not swerve from their creed & you cowards as you are, sit still indifferent to your fate. If you have an atom of manhood in you go and release them.⁷ These taunts inflamed their hearts. The spark which fell from female lips ignited it at once and the night of the 10th May 1857 saw the commitment of a tragedy never before witnessed since India passed under British sway.⁸ The flames of fire which broke out at Meerut on may 10 spread rapidly over a large part of Northern India.

BEGUM HAZRAT MAHAL:-

While the women of Meerut were instrumental, to some extent in accelerating action on the part of sepoys, conditions in Lucknow , a place not very far away from Meerut , were inspiring Begum Hazrat Mahal to take the leadership in hand .Hazrat Mahal was a dancing girl and Later became an acknowledged wife of king 'Wajid Ali Shah' of oudh by Motah. The Annexation of oudh which was completed in 1856 came as a heavy blow to the royal family, chiefs and the people. Hazrat Mahal discontented as she was, decided to stay back in Lucknow, while the deposed king went to Calcutta & took his abode there.⁹

As a consequence of absorption of oudh in to British territory, as many as 60,000 people were thrown out of employment. Artisan and craftsmen lost their only means of livelihood. Another factor which caused annoyance was that Mr. Jackson resident at Lucknow, had converted charmanzil, a place for the royal a building of sanctity was changed into a store house.

In the early part of April Dr. Walls a British medical officer in luck now, tested the quality of medicine before administering to patients by appalling the bottle to his mouth. This was disliked by soldiers around and they refused to take it test 'the taint of a Christian' should degrade their caste. The complaint went up to the commandant of us native Infantry who reconciled the excited soldiers .The night of this incident saw the doctor's bungalow being destroyed by fire .The culprit could not be traced after a couple of days a number of huts of the 13th regiment were burnt a under mysterious circumstances.¹⁰The wounds received as a result of absorption of oudh were still fresh when rebellion broke out at Meerut on May 10th 1857.The revolution spread rapidly to other towns of oudh and the rebels were successful in establishing their authority in many places one after another . Consequently by the middle of June the British regime in this province lay prostrate. Lucknow was the only places where the English did not leave the Residence building and faced the rebels till they were able to regain their lost power.

Hazrat mahal was an influential lay and was the primary figure in bringing about this in surrection. "She has excited all Oudh," Says Russell "to take up the interests of her son, and chiefs have sworn to be faithful to him."¹¹ The boy's name was 'Brijis Qadir' who was then 11 years old. Hazrat Mahal who became the regent Queen exercised all the authority. She ruled the state

diplomatically and exhibited qualities of good leadership and statesmanship. The high officers in the state were distinguished between the Hindus and Muslims she also honoured brave soldiers.¹² Hazrat Mahal Begum was perhaps not fated to rule the state for a long time. In September, 1857 Came the news of the de fate of the rebels in Delhi which was not only discovering but was also ruinous for her designs. After a few encounters with rebels outram was able to occupy Alam Bagh. On sept, 23rd 1857 and finally reached the besieged Garson on sept, 25.

The history of the English in Kanpur was another set back to her plans. But nothing deterred her from the path she had durbars to encourage officers and soldiers. One of her ideas was too chosen. The Begum kept up the spirit and held Durbars to encourage officers and soldiers. One of her ideas was to cause her own death by taking poison instead of becoming a prisoner of the English.¹³ In the month of Nov, Sir Colin Campbell, Commander in chief of the British forces along with a small reinforcement arrived at luck now. The Begum had to face the energy in thick fight. Her position daily grew weaker, as a result the soldiers became panicky and to run away. The rebels also become disrespectful to her. This situation created difficulties for her and naturally made her doubtful of the resistance put up by the Begum, the English Commander was able to escort the besieged garrison from out of the residency to Alam Bagh.¹⁴ She tried to encourage the soldiers and is reported to have appeared on the battlefield on feb, 25, 1858 mounted on an elephant.¹⁵ Alam Bagh was vigorously attacked by a force sometimes led Maulvi Ahmedulla Shah and at other times by the Begum in person¹⁶

Russell observation thus : "Begum declares undying war against us and in the circumstances of the annexation of the kingdom the apparent ingratitude to the family for money lent and aid given at most critical times has many grounds for her indignant rhetoric."¹⁷

Hazrat Mahal never lost heart and moved among her men with spirit that deserved better success.¹⁸ She went about in the battlefield inspiring her troops. By March, 18th 1858, all the strong points in lucknow were in the hands of the English. But a powerful force probably by the Begum held Mushbagh ,a palace in luck now ,till the 19th march,1858.¹⁹ Later the Begum reinforced Maulavi Ahmad –Ulla-Shah in his attack on Shahajanpur on oct,1st 1858, she issued in a long letter ,instructions to the troops directing them the line of attack. This document, wrote the chief Commissioner, "upper's to be genuine and many of them movements ordered have been made and failed."

"Sarfars Begum writing to Akhtar Mahals wife of Wajid Ali who was ar Calcutta made mention of Hazrat Mahal thus : " I did not know Hazrat Mahal was such as brave lady, seated on an elephant she led her troops against the English without any fear."²⁰ "Another Begum Sayda wrote to Wajid Ali thus: "Hazrat Mahal showed such courage that the enemy was temifield. She turned out to be very daring .She has brought name to the sultan Alam."²¹ Begum Hazrat Mahal had to escape to Nepal authorities was hesitant to give asylum to the rebels. The Nepal govt. in a strongly worded letter on 15th January 1859 wrote that if she was to honour the treaty with the British govt. the rebels must be surrendered to that government and therefore: If you should remain or seek an asylum within my territory and frontier, the Gorkha troops will not Certainly, in pursuance of the treaty agreed upon by both the Nepal state will neither assist nor show Marcy to, nor permit to remain in its territories or within its frontiers to those who have been so faithless and ungrateful as to do mischief and raise animosity and in serration against their master."²² These threats however were all in vain as Begum totally refused to surrender to the foreign government so that she did not hold any communication with the rebel leaders or with their troops or with the people of India.²³ Hazrat Mahal Begum faced many difficulties in Nepal. In her camp only women

and boys fewer than 12 were allowed to stay. When the prime minister of Nepal proclaimed in the rebels camp the government Generals terms and invited them to surrender the Begum said, "They would sooner die than surrender."²⁴ The British authorities offered her the terms that "The Begum Hazrat Begum Mahal will receive all the consideration which is due to her as a women and member of a Royal house but political powers she shall never have, and she will do wisely to secure by prompt submission a generous treatment and an honourable position for the rest of her life."²⁵ The begum did not agree to these terms as she was not prepared to see herself deprived of all political powers , though it may b said that there might have been a remote fear in her mind about revengeful treatment from the British as it was alleged in some quarters that she was a party to the murder of Europeans .

After the outbreak was quelled. The queen of England issued a proclaimed to appease the people .She promised to respect the agreements entered in to by the company and also to respect the religious rites .etc. But it did not receive an unqualified success. Begum Hazrat Mahal issued a counter proclamation challenging the truth and sincerity of the promises made by the British Queen in the proclamation.²⁶ She condemned the article relating to agreement and contracts and asserted that there was refused to her. Nepal Government however allowed her a pension of Mohari Rs.400 a month. The Begum tried to come back to India in 1877 but orders were issued where by any request made by either Birjis and his mother who or was a very clever and designing women should not be allowed to visit British India.²⁷The Govt, of India clearly explained that "If that did enter the territories of the British Government they would on no consideration receive any assistance or allowance from Government and would be required to the under the surveillance of the magistrate of the district in which they might take up residence."²⁸AS a result of the attitude of the British government she could not come to India and hence had to reside in Nepal permanently .Thus did the Begum for the great cause in exile in 1879 in a land foreign to her.²⁹

There were other women who laid their lives in the battlefield but whose names still remain unknown .Gordon Alexander observes among the slain at Sikandara Bad there were a few regresses they fought like wild cats and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected.³⁰ Forbes Mitchell makes mention of a women who was shot at Sikandarabad .She was armed with heavy old pattern piston. Seated on the papal tree she killed half a dozen people.³¹ Russell also seems to have discovered a woman few days after the battle. She was dead but near her body was enormous mine.³² In Delhi there was another woman who becomes famous under the name of maid of Delhi. She would go to the battle field in a sward's uniform and was reported to have been worse than five sepoy's in the battle field. 'Siddia-Uli' Akbar reported that the she had given a horse by the king.³³

Begum Hazrta Mahal's contribution is very important in the Revolt of 1857-58 AD. He was the first lady of the revolt in India (1857-858) and he was played a very important Role in the Battle (Revolt) of 1857-1858 in India.

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