

The Contribution of Uda Devi Pasi in the First Revolution of Awadh: A Historical Study

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ABSTRACT: Uda Devi was a warrior in the Indian Rebellion of 1857, who fought against the British East India Company. While upper caste histories highlight the resistance contributions of upper caste heroines like Jhansi Rani, the reality was also that the battles for independence from British colonial rule also featured Dalit resistance fighters like Devi. Devi and other female Dalit participants are today remembered as the warriors or “Dalit Veeranganas” of the 1857 Indian Rebellion. She was married to Makka Pasi who was a soldier in the army of Hazrat Mahal. On seeing the rising anger of the Indian people with the British administration, Uda Devi reached out to the queen of that district, Begum Hazrat Mahal to enlist for the war. In order to prepare for the battle that was headed their way, the Begum helped her form a women’s battalion under her command. When the British attacked Awadh, both Uda Devi and her husband were part of the armed resistance. When she heard that her husband had died in the battle, she unleashed her final campaign in full force.

KEYWORDS: Uda Devi, rebellion, Awadh, contribution, british, dalit, campaign, warrior, independence

I. INTRODUCTION

Uda Devi took part in the Battle in Sikandar Bagh in November 1857. After issuing instructions to her battalion, she climbed up a pipal tree and began shooting at advancing British soldiers. A British officer noted that many of the casualties had bullet wounds indicating steep, downward trajectory. Suspecting a hidden sniper, he ordered his officers to fire at the trees and dislodged a rebel who fell to the ground dead. Upon investigation, the sniper was revealed as Uda Devi. William Forbes-Mitchell, in *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny*, writes of Uda Devi: "She was armed with a pair of heavy old-pattern cavalry pistols, one of which was in her belt still loaded, and her pouch was still about half full of ammunition, while from her perch in the tree, which had been carefully prepared before the attack, she had killed more than half-a-dozen men." The Pasis of Pilibhit, in particular, come together on November 16 every year to commemorate the anniversary of Uda Devi's martyrdom.[1,2]

When we talk about women’s roles in 1857, we immediately think of Rani Lakshmbai and Begum Hazrat Mahal. But were these the only women who contributed to the struggle? There were many from the non-dominant castes that were significant to the freedom struggle that are hardly spoken of.

Is it because they belonged to marginalised groups in society and so their sacrifices weren’t taken into account and no one cared to propagate their chronicles of courage? Or is the reason for their “absence” that in traditional patriarchal society, women were not seen as warriors? The victors rewrote post-1857 history to suit their Savarna interests. Thus, eulogising or glorifying non-dominant caste people who participated in the uprising against the enemy was not on the agenda.

Uda Devi was born in a small village in Awadh, Uttar Pradesh. Seeing the rising anger of the Indian people against the British administration, she reached out to Begum Hazrat Mahal to enlist for war. In order to prepare for the battle that was headed their way, the Begum helped her form a women’s battalion under her command. Uda Devi and her Dalit sisters were the warriors or Veeranginis (amazons/heroines) of the 1857 Indian Rebellion against the British East India Company. In the centre of an intersection outside Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow, stands a statue of a patina-covered, sexually ambiguous figure carrying a rifle and walking forward with a determined glare. The inscription on the base of the statue named the figure as Uda Devi Pasi, a heroine of the Mutiny of 1857.[3,4]

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In the fall of 1857, northern India was in a state of virtual anarchy. A general revolt against the growing hegemony of the British East India Company consumed the cities of Delhi, Jhansi and Kanpur. In Lucknow, a small British garrison clung tenuously to life at the Residency (a collection of buildings) on the banks of the Gomti River. Surrounded by rebels and lacking adequate supplies, the dwindling detachment of British soldiers, loyal Indian sepoys and non-combatants teetered on the edge of annihilation throughout the summer of 1857. A relief column of British soldiers broke through in September but lacked the firepower to leave again.

In November, General Colin Campbell broke through the rebel lines and eventually saved the entrapped garrison. During this 'Second relief of Lucknow,' Campbell's 93rd Highland Regiment advanced along the Southern bank of the Gomti until they reached the Palace of Sikandarbag. The British forces met desperate resistance from rebels who had fortified the position. In the battle that followed, over 2,000 rebels and many soldiers lost their lives in hand-to-hand combat.[5,6]

After the British overran Sikandarbag, an officer noted that many of the British casualties had bullet wounds indicating a steep, downward trajectory. Suspecting that a sniper remained hidden in a nearby pipal tree, British officers fired at the tree and dislodged a rebel who fell to the ground with a thud, dead. Further investigation revealed that the rebel was in fact, a non-dominant caste woman named Uda Devi Pasi, who had donned men's clothing to participate in the uprising.

Today Uda Devi is an inspiration to women from non-dominant castes. Each year, on November 16, members of the Pasi caste gather at the sight of her final plunge and celebrate her as an anti-imperialist rebel who defied convention and struck a blow for the embryonic cause of Indian Independence. They come from all over West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar to offer oblations to the image of Uda Devi Pasi. Many are women from remote villages who travel long distances to attend.

For Pasis, traditionally a caste of pig-herders and toddy-tappers, Uda Devi Martyrdom Day is the day to revel in the bravery and martial spirit of their ancestors and to chant the rousing slogans, Uda Devi amar rahe! (Uda Devi is immortal!) and Uda Devi Zindabad! (Long live Uda Devi!).[7,8]

It has been over a century since she was martyred. Yet, the memory of Uda Devi's sacrifice is kept alive by Dalit communities who cherish her as a model of fearless Dalit womanhood.

The actual history of the Pasi caste is wholly lost to the world. Whatever contributions they made passed without record. The Pasis, like numerous other non-dominant castes of India, have existed for a millennia, through continuous attempts of Savarnas as well as the British to keep them from being a part of History.

Koi unko habsin kehta, koi kehta neech achchut.
abla koi unhein batlaye, koi kahe unhe majboot.

(Some called them Africans, some untouchable.
Some called them feeble, others strong)

Many African women were employed in the court of the Awadh nawabs (emperors) to guard the harem. They too perished in the battles in Lucknow during 1857.

A crucial feature of the great uprising was the participation. Women not only from royal and noble backgrounds but also from vulnerable communities played important roles. Though freedom was fought for by all, it was only granted to a few.[9,10]

II. DISCUSSION

Uda Devi was a warrior, one of the fiercest, in 19th century India when the call for independence from the British was being led by some of the most powerful voices of women in history. Marking Dalit History Month, we take a look at Uda Devi's life and times as an icon of Dalit influence and female inspiration.

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When the first war of independence of 1857 is brought up, in either historical reminiscence or discourse exchange, the name of the woman warrior thrown up most is Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi. But leaders like Uda Devi, whose contributions to the resistance remain unparalleled, deserve equal space, celebration and recognition in both history and public consciousness.

Hailing from Awadh in an India then ruled over by the British East India Company, Uda Devi was committed to the end of colonial administration that, since gaining a stronghold in the country from the 18th century, had come to symbolise foreign oppression, extortion and exploitation.

Given her location in the whereabouts of where the 1857 mutiny began and shaped over three consecutive years, Uda Devi was present right at the heart of the first fight for independence. She partook in the resistance as a frontline warrior, leading an impressive and accomplished women's battalion under her command.[11,12]

She, along with her Dalit sister soldiers from the 1850s such as Jhalkaribai and Mahabiri Devi, are today commemorated as veeranginis (female warriors of valour) and looked up at as upholders of justice, equality and resilience. The social milieu of Uda Devi was, in fact, a constitution of feminist power. She belonged to the vicinity ruled by Begum Hazrat Mahal, the second wife of Awadh's last ruler Wajid Ali Shah. Moved to action with the growing unrest of the 1850s, Uda Devi approached the queen with an intent to get enlisted for the nearing war. Armed with courage, ammunition and an army of women behind her, Uda Devi led her battalion into the Battle of Sikandar Bagh in 1857. Historians note this particular battle for being one of the most significant and "fiercest" ones in Lucknow during the revolt. She fought valiantly and, it is said most ferociously in the aftermath of her husband and army soldier Makka Pasi's death in the war. Her own death reportedly came when British soldiers shot down a sniper, later identified to be her. In records, the Pasi caste – identified as members of the Dalit community present predominantly in Uttar Pradesh – have professed commitment to keeping the late icon's legacy alive. November 16 is marked as her death anniversary, a day for hailing and remembering Uda Devi's resistance to both oppression and patriarchy.

A statue of Uda Devi stands tall at Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow, where the warrior icon looks upon the city with a stance and weapon ready to engage in combat.[13,14]

In 2018, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) reportedly proposed the construction of a 100-foot tall statue of Uda Devi. However, political experts have commented this move was aimed less at historical revival and Dalit women's recognition, and more at voter appeasement.

While history books have documented the likes of Rani Laxmi Bai and praised their valour, a few unsung heroes of India's First War of Independence (1857) have been overlooked. Straight from the annals of history, we bring to you the story of Uda Devi- a valiant fighter who killed more than two dozen soldiers of the British army that laid siege to Lucknow, under General Colin Campbell's guidance. Belonging to an age where women were expected to remain in the shadows, Uda Devi took charge on the battlefield and gave her life fighting for Awadh. Uda Devi Pasi was born in a small village of Awadh and like any other passionate Indian, her blood was also boiling as she witnessed the rising atrocities of Britishers. She joined Begum Hazrat Mahal's endeavours of fighting for independence and was given the command of the woman's battalion by the Begum, during the Seige of Lucknow.[15,16]

After the army regiment headed by General Campbell had decimated Sikandar Bagh, it was observed that the bullet wounds of several British soldiers indicated a steep, downward trajectory. Suspecting that a sniper was still hidden in the nearby tree, Britishers open-fired and a rebel's body fell on the ground. Further investigations disclosed that this rebel was Uda Devi- a woman who was dressed as a man to participate in this struggle for freedom.

If you have ever passed the intersection outside Sikandar Bagh, you must've noticed a statue carrying a rifle- this statue is how this city is still paying homage to Uda Devi. Killing almost 32 British soldiers, she has etched her name in Indian history as the anti-imperialist rebel who defied conventions with every bullet she fired!

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One of the fiercest battles in Lucknow was the Battle in SikandarBagh in November 1857. SikandarBagh was manned by the rebels and fell along commander Colin Campbell's route as he marched to rescue the Europeans besieged in the Residency. A bloody battle ensued and thousands of Indian soldiers were killed. A story goes that the British heard a crack shot, who was firing from atop a tree. It was only when they managed to fell the tree that they discovered that the person shooting was a woman, who was then identified as Uda Devi from the Pasi community. Her statue graces the square outside SikandarBagh in Lucknow today. Forbes-Mitchell, in *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny*, writes of Uda Devi: "She was armed with a pair of heavy old-pattern cavalry pistols, one of which was in her belt still loaded, and her pouch was still about half full of ammunition, while from her perch in the tree, which had been carefully prepared before the attack, she had killed more than half-a-dozen men." Many African women were employed in the court of the Awadh nawabs to guard the harem. They too perished in the battles in Lucknow during 1857. A particular feature of the great uprising was the participation not just of women from royal and noble backgrounds but of women from depressed classes too. Another dalit veerangana was Mahabiri Devi from the village of Mundbhar in the district of Muzaffarnagar. Mahabiri formed a group of 22 women, who together attacked and killed many British soldiers in 1857. The women were all caught and killed.[17,18]

III. RESULTS

Uda Devi from Lucknow was a soldier in army of begum hazrat Mahal. She was very much interested in freedom struggle and wanted to fight British will all her might. She was not only trained in traditional weapons but was also familiar with modern weapons.

During 1857 battle of independence, Meerut, Kanpur and Lucknow, everywhere mutiny started in British army. They faced revolution from every corner Uda Devi was stationed in sikandarbagh fort with another 2200 soldiers. Her husband Makka Pasi was also a soldier in Avadh army.

British had faced serious repercussions in Kanpur and they were being tyrannical wherever they found resistance. They shot and hanged anyone who was fighting them. Though sikandarbagh fort was heavily guarded,

British due to their higher number of soldiers and advanced ammunition broke into the fort wall. They started massacring anyone they found. Uda Devi saw his husband and other fellow soldiers dying before her eyes. She pledged to take revenge till her last breath.

Guiding rest of the soldiers to take defensive position and spread around, she climbed up on a dense peepal tree inside the fort compound. She had 2 old pattern heavy cavalry pistol with her along with pouch full of ammunition.[19]

It was difficult for anyone to see her from ground as the tree was very much dense. She kept firing on each soldier who came in her aim. One by one, 32 soldiers dead bodies kept piling up below the peepal tree.

Captain Dawson who was leading the British army, ordered his subordinate Quaker Wallace to look in the branches. After some serious watching, Wallace fired at Uda Devi and she fell down dead from the tree.

Uda Devi is known as one of the first snipers in History of battle of independence of 1857. It's sad that our society isn't taught about our freedom fighters today.

Uda Devi is one of those women of the Revolt about whom we mainly know through legend. It was in the Battle of Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow in November 1857 that the British realised that the person firing at them from a tree was a woman. She was identified as Uda Devi from the Pasi caste, which was considered to be untouchable. According to a personal account, she killed more than half-a-dozen men.

he revolt of 1857 figures in a major way in the narratives of popular dalit histories, where a completely alternative account of the revolt emerges, converging histories, myths, realities and retelling of the pasts. The outbreak of 1857 has been regarded as a memorable episode in Indian history. It was in a sense one of the first formidable revolt that had broken out against foreign domination. To prove the nationalist credentials of dalits, their popular histories have thus completely transformed 1857.[20]

Before going into these narratives let us briefly examine conventional and standardised histories of the revolt. Various strands of historiography largely seem to converge, particularly on the question of the caste character of the revolt. According to nationalist historians like S B Chaudhuri, Tara Chand and R C Mazumdar, the social composition of 1857 consisted of the ruling class and the traditional elite of the society, who were the "natural leaders" of the revolt. The elitist character of the revolt is highlighted by referring to it as a general movement of the Muslims and the Hindus-

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princes, landholders, soldiers, scholars and theologians. Marxist scholars seem to fall within the same paradigm where they basically see the revolt as a last attempt of the elite medieval order to halt the process of its dissolution and recover its lost status. Thomas R Metcalf too emphasises that it was not merely a mutiny nor a war of independence. For him 1857 was “a traditionalist movement in which those who had the most to lose in the new sought the restoration of the old pre-British order”. In his significant work, Eric Stokes, while highlighting the local background of the upsurge, also argues that it was the fear of the loss of an upper caste status due to the use of fat-greased cartridges that precipitated the uprising. He shows how ashraf Muslims, brahmins and rajputs had secured a near monopoly over entry into the Bengal army and they were afraid of a loss to their status. Many other contemporary accounts too emphasise the hurt and the fears of pollution felt up upper caste Hindus as an important reason for the revolt. How do dalit histories of 1857 sit in with these accounts? The purity/pollution ties of the upper castes and classes, linked with the crossing of seas or biting of the flesh of the cow or the pig, do not fit in with dalits. There have been other scholars who have emphasised the lower caste base of the revolt as well. Thus, for example, Rudrangshu Mukherjee emphasises the mutual dependence between peasantry and talukdars, which provided the basis for common and united action at this tumultuous juncture. He thus links the seemingly disjointed and contradictory realms of the elite and the common masses. Gautam Bhadra also highlights the common leaders of the revolt. However, even these scholars, in spite of their best intentions, do not explicitly focus on dalits and even less so on women. As Bhadra says, “In all these representations what has been missed out is the ordinary rebel, his role and his perception of alien rule and contemporary crisis” (emphasis in original).[18,19]

With the rise of the dalit movement and literature in north India, the history of 1857 however has been completely inversed, with many histories of it being rewritten, particularly since the 1960s. Contemporary dalit perceptions and compositions of 1857 are very different from scholarly historical studies on the subject, or even constructed “popular” perceptions, and represent the historical consciousness of the revolt in the public memory of the dalits. The pamphlets and books on dalit histories of 1857 – which may also be described as unofficial dalit histories of colonial India – combine myths, memories and histories, depicting dalit versions of the revolt. Dalit writers are attempting here to look upon the mutiny as part of their struggle for freedom. The revolt has taken on the character of a dalit resistance, where alternative dalit heroes are represented as the real symbols of 1857 in dalit popular nationalist consciousness. The rebel dalit heroes – some constructed, some exaggerated, some “discovered” – have become heroes fighting for a free India. In these accounts, the armies of soldiers against British consist largely of dalits. New dalit histories argue that the dalits had nothing much to lose in pre-British times, as their condition had been miserable even then. So it was actually dalits who fought for independence in 1857, while the upper caste Hindus and Indian rulers only fought to restore their rule. The focus of this literature is no longer on the sepoys or the greased cartridges, but on dalits groaning under foreign oppression. As the famous dalit poet Bihari Lal Harit says regarding 1857:

nai, dhobi, kurmi, kachchi/bharbhuje bhaat kumhaar lare.

Lare khak rub mochi dhanak/sab daliton ke parivar lare.

(Barbers, washermen, kurmis, gardeners, grain-parchers, bards and potters fought.

Cobblers rolling in dust and cotton-carders fought. All dalit families fought.)

Dalit narratives of 1857 deploy an impassioned language, and are written usually by dalit men who are not trained historians. These writers are inspired by altogether different sentiments, and their writings reveal the inner dynamics of dalit politics as well. They are writing history with a mission by claiming a past and using it for the furtherance of their future. One of their purposes in writing inspirational histories of this kind is to stimulate dalit nationalism, dalit patriotic sentiment, and their pride. They are rewriting history to provide dignity to the dalits. Present day feelings are ascribed to dalit heroes of 1857, and they are seen as teaching a moral lesson that the dalits of today need to emulate the heroic deed of their past heroes, and fight for their rights today as well. In the dalit literature, 1857 has become the Caesar of India, which is more powerful when dead than alive. It has got inscribed as a heroic popular uprising fought by the lowly, a symbol of challenge to the British power by the dalits. It entailed united dalit activism and sacrifice of

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enormous numbers. Its history is constantly being reshaped in the present socio-cultural and political context. It has an inspirational quality, an effective conviction, which signifies a present political importance.

1857 has also become a marker for the dalits to prove their nationalist credentials, and claim their own space in the freedom struggle and the history of a nation in the making. By this, dalits also seek to win acceptance from the wider society by creating and legitimising a space for themselves within the nationalist narratives. However, these histories are not just reinventions of the past or inspirational histories. They also reveal a deep impassioned plea to recognise the unsung heroes of the revolt, who were often illiterate and left no written records. Folksongs, oral narratives and myths also thus become the basis of these accounts.[17,18] As says one:

yatra-tatra sarvatra milegi, unki gaatha ki charcha.

kintu upekshit veervaron ka – kabhi nahin chapta parcha.

However, this literature has not found its way in mainstream, conventional and canonised historical narratives of 1857, be it school textbooks, restructured curricula or scholarly works. The reasons for this may be camouflaged in a language about “quality”, authenticity and written historical records. Dalit literature on 1857 may be seen as “inferior”, sensational, mimetic and unintellectual, though moving and passionate. The cannon fodder of 1857 history has thus kept dalit versions of 1857 away from the loci of authority – university departments, literary associations and syllabi. Dalit literature on 1857 occupies a different publicpolitical domain and presents an alternate form of knowledge. The language and vocabulary deployed in dalit literature on 1857 stresses the need for dalitisation of history and to examine the dalit leaders of the revolt. Dalits claim that reinventing 1857 from a dalit perspective is imperative in order to represent reality. While appropriating the past, dalit writers are simultaneously questioning the blurred presentations and partial/prejudiced histories of historians, arguing that dalit heroes of the revolt have been completely erased by them. They argue that most historians implicitly hold their high caste biases when writing histories of 1857.

A chief feature of these popular dalit histories of 1857 is the way dalit women get represented in them. Here myths about dalit viranganas (heroic women) are being reinvented as a potent symbol for identity formation and as a critical part of a movement to define political and social positioning of dalits. Narratives of dalit viranganas abound, with a long list of them littering the Indian past. These women are ascribed particularly heroic roles. In fact, dalit female icons, engaged in radical armed struggles, far outnumber dalit men in 1857. These writings invoke political and public dalit memories, where women like Jhalkari Bai of the kori caste, Uda Devi, a pasi, Mahabiri Devi, a bhangi and Asha Devi, a gurjari, all stated to be involved in the 1857 revolt, have become the symbols of bravery of particular dalit castes and ultimately of all dalits.

Representing the dalit woman in certain modes in 1857 also indicates ways in which pasts are remembered and retailed, and the relationships of such pasts to people’s sense of belonging. As has been remarked, representation can pose afresh the relationship between memory, myth and history, oral and written, transmitted and inscribed, stereotypicality and lived history. Reading the histories of dalit women viranganas of 1857 through the lens of representation adds important dimensions to our understandings of it, while also revealing tensions between the pedagogical and the performative, the rhetoric and the reality. Foucault has argued that all representations are by their very nature insidious instruments of surveillance, oppression and control – both tools and effects of power. However, if we argue that representations of dalit women are constructed only to support dominant modes of ideology, and that their aim is ultimately coercive, then how can we use this space also for confrontation? Does representation have the scope of carving out more contingent, varied and flexible modes of resistances? Within the field of representation, counter-images can emerge, challenging hegemonic images. In India, there have been a significant number of studies concerned with the representations of high caste, middle class women, particularly of the colonial period. My own earlier work had focused on this. While significant in their own right, there is an implicit implication in these works that since dalit women fall within the category of “women”, their representation need not be singled out for a separate study. Thus, portrayal of dalit women of the colonial period as a major area of feminist scholarly examination has remained negligible and on the fringes. Dalit literature on 1857 provides us a significant moment to examine alternative representations of dalit women. It can be an important source of insight into gender politics from a dalit perspective and a site of struggle over meanings. While highlighting the centrality of these dalit women viranganas in the symbolic

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constitution of dalit identity, this literature simultaneously reveals a world turned upside down, challenging textual, academic and historical narratives of 1857. It further shows how resistance to dominant discourses about dalit women has been coded and lived by various groups of dalits within dalit communities at different historical moments. Dalit women viranganas emerge here as not only visible, but as conspicuous and central characters, and objects of attention and adulation.[20]

Thus for example, to take the case of Jhalkari Bai, there has been a proliferation of a vast number of popular Hindi tracts, written by various authors, and cultural invocations on her, including 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, published from Agra. Various dalit magazines have published articles on her. Similarly, on Uda Devi, there are poems, plays, stories and magazines penned and narrated on various occasions.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Uda Devi is said to have been born in the village Ujriao of Lucknow. She was also known as Jagrani and was married to Makka Pasi. She became an associate of Begum Hazrat Mahal, and Uda formed a women's army, with herself as the commander. Her husband became a martyr in the battle at Chinhat. Uda decided to take revenge. When the British attacked Sikandar Bagh in Lucknow under Campbell, he was faced with an army of dalit women:

koi unko habsin kehta, koi kehta neech achchut.

abla koi unhein batlaye, koi kahe unhe majboot.

(Some called them black African women, some untouchable. Some called them weak, others strong.)

It is significant here that even W Gordon-Alexander's account of the storming of Sikandar Bagh by British troops states:

In addition...there were...even a few amazon negresses, amongst the slain. These amazons having no religious prejudices against the use of greased cartridges, whether of pigs' or other animal fat, although doubtless professed Muhammadans, were armed with rifles, while the Hindu and Muhammadan East Indian rebels were all armed with musket; they fought like wild cats, and it was not till after they were killed that their sex was even suspected.

Uda Devi was one of them, who is said to have climbed over a 'pipal' tree and shot dead, according to some accounts 32 and some 36, British soldiers. One soldier spotted someone in the tree and shot the person dead, and only then it was discovered that she was a woman. Realising her brave feat, even British officers like Campbell bowed their heads over her dead body in respect.[16,17]

Asha Devi Gurjari is portrayed as a leader to a large number of young girls and women and it is stated that on May 8, 1857, she along with a large number of other women like Valmiki Mahaviri Devi, Rahimi Gurjari, Bhagwani Devi, Bhagwati Devi, Habiba Gurjari, Indrakaur, Kushal Devi, Naamkaur, Raajkaur, Ranviri Valmiki, Seheja Valmiki and Shobha Devi attacked the British army and died while fighting.

Certain features stand out in these various narratives. Many of them claim to be centred around neglected dalit women warriors specifically, whose marginalisation cannot be tolerated by dalits any longer. In all of them, these dalit women are depicted as brave from their very childhood, and the 1857 revolt becomes the turning point which sparks them to accomplish great deeds in the face of high odds. However, the voices of dalit viranganas themselves are usually faint discursive threads, as their stories of adventure and bravery are narrated through a variety of sources – oral, official accounts and dalit male authors. It is these authors who provide narrative coherence, filling in the gaps, and slipping into the present tense to add dramatic flourish and detail to the stories. The past and the present blur and mingle to provide a cohesive narrative of dalit oppression and the bravery of these women against all odds. Many of these dalit viranganas become the symbols of pride for one particular dalit caste. Thus Uda Devi is revered by the pasis

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particularly, and has emerged as a symbol of Pasi honour, dignity, pride, mobilisation and rights. On the other hand, Jhalkari Bai has been appropriated, eulogised and celebrated by all dalit groups, irrespective of divisions between them, and has become a symbol of unity of all dalits.

Most of these dalit viranganas have Devi or Bai suffixed to their names. They are also projected as highly moral, very “noble”, super brave and super nationalist dalit women. They are emblems of shakti. The written and visual images of these viranganas in the texts itself and on the cover of these pamphlets spectacularise them as usually clad in “masculine” attires, with their bodies all covered up. They are shown to be expert in horse-riding, swimming, bow-arrow and sword fighting. Through such portrayals, dalits hope to garner greater respect, opportunity and dignity to these viranganas, and through them to all dalits. Simultaneously this feeds into conceptions of masculinity. It also covertly challenges notions of dalit female sexuality, and can be seen as a reaction to images of sexually immoral dalit women. By shunning outward expressions of sexuality, dalit women can also hope to build a space where they can wield more control over their bodies and gain dignity and respect within the dominant culture.

Scattered, often thin, evidence is sited and quoted by dalits repeatedly. Thus on Jhalkari Bai, a constantly quoted source is Vrindavan Lal Varma’s Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmibai. It was published in 1946 after intense personal research and historical reflection, and it mentioned the dusky-complexioned newly wed Jhalkari Dulaiya of the kori caste, who bore a striking resemblance to the Rani. Vishnu Rao Godse, who is said to have been present in the fort when the Rani had fought against General Rose, too had made a reference to Jhalkari in his Marathi book Majha Pravas (My Travels). Similarly on Uda Devi, Amritlal Nagar’s Gadar ke Phool and William Forbes-Mitchell’s Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny are often cited.[15,16]

And today these stories stand as given, visible truths, with stamps issued in their name, many statues constructed, public rallies and meeting organised, celebrations and festivities conducted, and even colleges and medical institutions formed in their name. Thus, for example, a huge public rally and a mela is organised in Lucknow every year near the statue of Uda Devi at Sikandar Bagh on November 16, the stated day of her martyrdom. With constant evocation, these names have become inscribed in popular dalit memories. Different political parties have repeatedly used these viranganas and made them an integral part of their electoral campaigns and mobilisation strategies, the most successful being the Bahujan Samaj Party, who have used them to build the image of Mayawati particularly.

Dalit women too are now trying to use these images in multiple ways to their maximum advantage. Besides ways in which these symbols have helped build up Mayawati, many have used these figures to question representations of dalit women in general, as well as their oppression and exploitation in real life. Thus Meena Pasi stated, “Uda Devi and Jhalkari Bai have shown to me that I too can resist all kinds of injustices. I do not have to take things lying down. These figures inspire me to question why I am getting less wages from the landlord, why I am beaten up by my husband when I do equal, if not more, work. I can look up to Uda Devi and say that nothing is impossible if one has the will to resist and fight”. These representations of dalit women viranganas may thus also be seen as “positive engendering”. They question and disrupt usual dominant stereotypes of dalit women, either negatively as ‘kutnis’ (evil) and vamps, or as passive victims, powerless and subordinated. The centrality of the dalit viranganas in the 1857 revolt in popular dalit literature provokes reflection on the enabling potential for women’s real lives of ubiquitous icons of dalit feminine power. These images also form a part of feminist studies, as instead of focusing on just dalit women’s “victimisation”, they point to their power and strategies of resistance, even though penned largely by men. Here dalit women are actors and agents in their own right. They are transformed from victims into victors within the context of a narrative. Jhalkari Bai, Uda Devi, Mahabiri Devi, and along with them many other dalit women, emerge as physically commanding and armed, infused with power, strength, bravery, activism and sacrifice, locked in violent conflict with the British.[21]

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