
A Historical Analysis of Rani Durgavati: The Indomitable Queen of the Narmada Valley

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Introduction

Rani Durgavati stands as a towering figure in the history of India—a symbol of courage, resilience, and indomitable spirit. Her reign over the Gondwana kingdom in central India during the 16th century was marked by strength, wisdom, and unwavering commitment to her people. Ascending to the throne of the Gondwana kingdom heralded the dawn of a prosperous era under Rani Durgavati's leadership. Her governance was distinguished by a firm dedication to principles of good governance, justice, and the welfare of her subjects. The Gondwana empire thrived under her guidance, encompassing vast expanses of fertile land, dense forests, and strategically significant forts.

Her rule was characterized by a strong emphasis on good governance, justice, and the welfare of her people. The Gondwana empire, nestled in the heart of central India, flourished under her leadership, encompassing vast swathes of fertile land, dense forests, and strategic forts. At the helm of administration, Rani Durgavati exhibited a remarkable blend of pragmatism and empathy, deeply attuned to the needs of her populace. She implemented policies aimed at ameliorating poverty, fostering agricultural productivity, and enhancing infrastructure. At the core of Rani Durgavati's governance lay a steadfast commitment to the welfare of her people and the principles of good governance. Durgavati facilitated an environment conducive to prosperity and progress. The kingdom's economy burgeoned, propelled by her dynamic approaches. This concerted effort culminated in a thriving economy, buoyed by flourishing trade routes that facilitated exchanges with neighboring regions. The allure of prosperity and security drew merchants and traders to the kingdom, contributing to its economic vitality.

Yet, Durgavati's vision extended beyond mere material wealth, encompassing a fervent dedication to the preservation and propagation of cultural heritage. Under her patronage, the arts, literature, and architectural endeavors flourished, serving as testament to her unwavering commitment to nurturing the cultural fabric of Gondwana. Within the kingdom's confines, artists, scholars, and artisans found solace and recognition, their talents nurtured and celebrated in an environment conducive to creative expression and intellectual pursuit.

The Empire

Rani Durgavati ascended to the throne of the Gondwana kingdom in a tumultuous era marked by shifting alliances and territorial disputes. Despite these challenges, she led her kingdom with remarkable prowess, establishing a robust administrative framework,

fostering economic prosperity, and promoting cultural enrichment. The Gondwana empire, under her rule, flourished as a beacon of stability and progress in the heart of central India.

Durgavati's governance was characterized by a keen sense of justice and a deep concern for the welfare of her subjects. She implemented policies to alleviate poverty, improve agricultural productivity, and enhance infrastructure. Trade flourished under her reign, facilitated by well-established routes that connected Gondwana with neighboring regions. The arts and literature thrived, patronized by a queen who recognized the importance of preserving and promoting cultural heritage.

Rani Durgavati's dominion in the Narmada valley stood as a bastion of strength and stability, earning her widespread acclaim and admiration. While she maintained harmonious relations with neighboring rulers in the central region, her realm drew covetous glances from Muslim officials who harbored ambitions of expansion into her territory. Despite her renown being further bolstered by her triumphant victory over Baaj Bahadur, the ruler of Malwa, the specter of external aggression loomed ominously on the horizon.

The ascension of Akbar and his subsequent conquest of Malwa, coupled with the defeat of Raja Ramchandra of Rewa by Akbar's Subedar Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan, signaled a shift in the geopolitical landscape of the region. With the boundaries of Akbar's empire extending southeastward to the borders of the Gondwana state, the fertile lands of the Narmada valley beckoned tantalizingly to ambitious Mughal officials.

Amidst such circumstances the tensions between Akbar and Queen Durgavati began to escalate, ultimately leading to a question of prestige and the looming possibility of war. Just as Maharana Pratap of Haldighati had challenged Akbar's power, in the Narmada valley, the valiant queen of Gondwana, Rani Durgavati, endeavored to prevent Akbar's forces from crossing the Narmada. This stance resulted in visible conflicts between Akbar's military officer Asaf Khan and Rani Durgavati.

In this climate of expansionism, Asaf Khan emerged as a key player, harboring designs to annex the coveted territories of the Narmada valley. With royal sanction, he resolved to unleash an assault on the Gadha state, setting the stage for a conflict that would reverberate throughout the region.

Akbar: The other side of the coin

Despite history often celebrates the Mughal emperor Akbar as a visionary ruler, it is essential to acknowledge his flaws and shortcomings. Akbar's greatness is marred by his authoritarian tendencies, his ruthless expansionist policies, and his disregard for the autonomy of local rulers. His attempts to centralize power and impose his authority on independent kingdoms often led to conflicts and unrest.

One of the key pillars of Akbar's expansionist policy was his military prowess and strategic acumen. He meticulously planned and executed military campaigns aimed at subjugating rival kingdoms and annexing their territories into the Mughal Empire. Akbar's army, bolstered by advanced weaponry, merciless soldiers and unethical tactics, proved to be a formidable force on the battlefield, enabling him to overcome resistance and assert Mughal dominance.

In addition to military conquest, Akbar employed diplomatic strategies to expand his empire. He forged alliances with local rulers through marriages, political alliances, and diplomatic negotiations, thereby securing their allegiance and cooperation. Akbar's policy

of religious tolerance also played a crucial role in his expansionist agenda, as it enabled him to win the support of diverse communities and integrate them into the Mughal fold.

While he is often known for his efforts to promote religious tolerance and cultural synthesis, his reign was marked by acts of cruelty and oppression. Akbar's expansionist policies brought him into conflict with indigenous rulers like Rani Durgavati, whose autonomy he sought to undermine in his quest for territorial aggrandizement.

Akbar's attempts to centralize power and impose his authority on independent kingdoms often led to unrest and rebellion. His disregard for the autonomy of local rulers and his willingness to resort to violence to achieve his goals alienated many of his subjects. Despite his efforts to centralize authority and promote religious tolerance through initiatives like the Din-i Ilahi, Akbar's legacy is tarnished by acts of cruelty and oppression. His expansionist policies, driven by a desire for territorial aggrandizement, brought him into conflict with indigenous rulers like Rani Durgavati, whose autonomy he sought to undermine. Akbar's legacy is overshadowed by his failures to respect the diversity and autonomy of the regions under his rule.

Subedar Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan was a key figure in Akbar's administration, tasked with overseeing Mughal interests in the central provinces. He played a crucial role in orchestrating Akbar's campaign against Rani Durgavati, marshaling troops and resources to quell the rebellion in Gondwana. Asaf Khan's reputation as a ruthless enforcer of Mughal authority preceded him, instilling fear and apprehension among the indigenous rulers who dared to challenge Akbar's rule. His unwavering loyalty to the emperor and his willingness to carry out his orders without question made him a formidable adversary on the battlefield.

The friction between Queen and Mughal

The relationship between Akbar and Rani Durgavati was fraught with tension from the outset. Akbar's expansionist ambitions brought him into direct conflict with the fiercely independent queen of Gondwana, whose refusal to submit to Mughal authority posed a direct challenge to his hegemonic aspirations. Durgavati's determination to defend her kingdom and preserve its sovereignty at any cost put her on a collision course with the Mughal emperor.

The tensions between Rani Durgavati of Gondwana and Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire stemmed from a combination of political, territorial, and ideological factors. Several key reasons contributed to the strained relationship between these two powerful figures:

1. Territorial Ambitions: Akbar's expansive empire-building ambitions inevitably brought him into conflict with regional rulers like Rani Durgavati, whose territories lay in strategic locations coveted by the Mughal Empire. The fertile lands of the Narmada valley, under Rani Durgavati's control, were of particular interest to Akbar's administration as they offered economic and strategic advantages.

2. Strategic Location: The Garha state, located in the Narmada valley, held strategic importance. Its control would provide Akbar with better access to central India and facilitate the consolidation of his empire's southern territories.

3. Resource Rich Region: The Narmada valley was known for its fertile land and abundant resources. Control over this region would bolster Akbar's economic resources and agricultural production.

4. Disruption of Regional Power: Rani Durgavati's growing influence and strong rule in the region may have been perceived as a challenge to Mughal authority. Akbar might have seen her as a potential threat to his rule in central India and sought to neutralize her power.

5. Political Motivations: There may have been political motivations behind Akbar's decision, such as establishing control over rebellious or independent rulers to ensure stability and loyalty to the Mughal Empire.

6. Resistance to Mughal Authority: Rani Durgavati, like many other regional rulers, resisted attempts by the Mughal Empire to assert control over her kingdom. She was fiercely protective of her sovereignty and autonomy, refusing to acknowledge the suzerainty of the Mughal Emperor. This resistance to Mughal authority naturally led to tensions and conflicts between the two powers.

7. Religious and Cultural Differences: Another factor contributing to the tensions between Rani Durgavati and Akbar was the religious and cultural differences between their respective domains. Akbar's policy of religious tolerance and cultural synthesis, while progressive in many respects, clashed with the traditional Hindu culture and customs of Rani Durgavati's kingdom. This ideological divergence exacerbated existing tensions and made compromise more difficult to achieve.

8. Competition for Influence: Both Rani Durgavati and Akbar were powerful and ambitious rulers seeking to expand their influence and control over the Indian subcontinent. Their overlapping spheres of influence and competing interests inevitably led to conflicts of interest and tensions as each sought to assert dominance over the other.

Overall, the tensions between Rani Durgavati and Akbar were rooted in a complex interplay of political, territorial, religious, and cultural factors.

Despite Akbar's attempts to subjugate Gondwana through diplomacy and coercion, Durgavati remained steadfast in her defiance. She refused to acknowledge Akbar's authority and continued to assert her independence, much to the chagrin of the Mughal court. The tension between the two powers escalated as Akbar sought to bring Gondwana under his control, leading to a showdown that would determine the fate of the region.

Escalation

The point of escalation in the tensions between Rani Durgavati and Emperor Akbar can be pinpointed to Akbar's decision to expand the Mughal Empire into the territories surrounding Gondwana, particularly the fertile lands of the Narmada Valley. This expansionist policy directly threatened the sovereignty and autonomy of Rani Durgavati's kingdom, leading to heightened tensions and eventual conflict.

Akbar's conquest of neighboring regions, such as Malwa, and the appointment of Subedar Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan to govern the newly acquired territories, signaled his intentions to extend Mughal authority into the southeastern regions bordering Gondwana. This encroachment on Gondwana's borders was perceived as a direct challenge to Rani Durgavati's rule and posed a significant threat to her kingdom's independence.

Furthermore, the defeat of regional rulers like Raja Ramchandra of Rewa by Akbar's forces further emboldened the Mughals and increased their presence in the vicinity of Gondwana. As Akbar's empire expanded closer to Gondwana's borders, the likelihood of confrontation between the two powers grew, ultimately leading to the point of escalation.

The culmination of these territorial ambitions and military actions was the Battle of Narrai Nala in the Narmada Valley, where Rani Durgavati and her forces confronted the advancing Mughal army led by Subedar Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan. This decisive clash marked the pinnacle of the tensions between Rani Durgavati and Akbar, as both sides engaged in a fierce struggle for control over the strategic region. In essence, the point of escalation in the tensions between Rani Durgavati and Emperor Akbar can be traced back to Akbar's expansionist policies and military actions, which directly threatened the sovereignty and autonomy of Gondwana, ultimately leading to armed conflict and confrontation.

According to a legend: Akbar once had sent a gold spinning wheel (Charkha) to Queen Durgavati, the meaning of this was that you are a woman and it is not the work of government but the work of spinning the wheel that suits you, on this Queen Durgavati gave a golden peg (cotton gin tool) was made and sent to Akbar, its meaning was that if the work of women is to spin the charkha then you are paid and your work is to gin cotton and not to rule. Akbar became extremely angry at this and sent Asaf to attack the Gadha kingdom. (*Khan, Shahnawaz. Mathir-Ul-Umra. Translated by H. Beveridge. Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 1941, Page 37-39*)

This legend highlights a symbolic exchange between Akbar and Queen Durgavati, reflecting their respective positions and pride. Akbar's gesture of sending a gold spinning wheel to Durgavati can be interpreted as a subtle insult, implying that she should focus on traditional women's roles rather than ruling a kingdom. In response, Durgavati sends a golden peg (cotton gin tool), symbolizing that if spinning the charkha represents women's work, then ginning cotton represents Akbar's work, suggesting that he should stick to his own duties rather than interfering in her realm.

This exchange symbolizes a clash of egos and ideologies between the two rulers. Akbar's anger and subsequent decision to send Asaf Khan to attack the Gadha kingdom can be seen as a reaction to Durgavati's defiance and refusal to submit to his implied authority. It underscores the political tension and power dynamics between regional rulers and the Mughal Empire during that period.

However, Dr. Hiralal considers this legend to be fake. (Jai Govind Ramnagar's Inscription (1617AD.) Stanza 24)

Another possible reason

Queen Durgavati had a very beautiful white elephant. Durgavati's Prime Minister (Deewan) Adhar Singh was Kayastha, he was very intelligent, when Akbar heard the praise of both of them, he demanded them from the queen.

The demand from Akbar for Queen Durgavati's Prime Minister Adhar Singh and her white elephant reveals the political intrigue and power dynamics at play during that period. Adhar Singh's intelligence and capabilities likely made him a valuable asset in Akbar's eyes, prompting the emperor to seek his services. Additionally, the possession of a beautiful white elephant would have been seen as a symbol of prestige and wealth, making it desirable for Akbar. (*Sleeman Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 1837, Page 628*)

However, for Queen Durgavati, surrendering her Prime Minister and prized elephant would not only be a loss of valuable resources but also a symbolic relinquishing of her sovereignty and authority. It would have been a difficult decision for her to make, as it

would weaken her position vis-à-vis the Mughal Empire and potentially compromise her ability to govern effectively.

Queen Durgavati's refusal to comply with Akbar's demands further escalated tensions between her kingdom and the Mughal Empire. Akbar's feelings of insult and offense would have been exacerbated by her defiance, leading him to authorize Asaf Khan to launch an attack on the Garha kingdom.

The historic battle between Akbar and Rani Durgavati was the culmination of years of simmering tension and mutual mistrust. Akbar's relentless pursuit of territorial expansion brought him into direct conflict with the fiercely independent queen of Gondwana, whose defiance challenged his authority and threatened his ambitions. The battle was not merely a contest for territorial supremacy but a clash of ideologies, pitting Akbar's imperialistic vision against Durgavati's commitment to self-governance and autonomy.

The battle was inevitable as both sides refused to back down from their respective positions. Akbar viewed Gondwana as a valuable addition to his empire, a territory ripe for exploitation and domination. Durgavati, on the other hand, saw Akbar's encroachment as a threat to her kingdom's autonomy and independence. The stage was set for a showdown that would determine the fate of the region and shape the course of history.

Historic battle of Narai Nala in Narmada Valley:

The historic Battle of Narai Nala in the Narmada Valley stands as a defining moment in the conflict between Rani Durgavati of Gondwana and the Mughal forces led by Subedar Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan, under the authority of Emperor Akbar. This pivotal clash, which took place in the mid-16th century, exemplifies the courage, determination, and strategic prowess of Rani Durgavati and her forces in the face of overwhelming odds.

Narai Nala, a strategic location in the valley, became the focal point of the conflict due to its geographical advantages and defensive capabilities. The battle of Narai Nala, fought amidst the rugged terrain of the Narmada Valley, was a watershed moment in the conflict between Akbar and Rani Durgavati. The Narmada Valley, where the Battle of Narai Nala unfolded, provided a natural fortress for Rani Durgavati's forces. The rugged terrain, dense forests, and steep cliffs posed significant challenges for the advancing Mughal army, whose traditional warfare tactics were ill-suited to such conditions.

Image (2) Battle Field of Narai

The odds were heavily stacked against her in this unequal encounter, with the invading Mughal forces boasting numerous trained soldiers armed with modern weaponry, while her own forces consisted of a small contingent of inexperienced soldiers equipped with antiquated weapons. Tragically, her trusted Faujdar, Arjun Das, fell in the midst of battle, compelling the Rani to assume direct leadership of the defense efforts. Durgavati's leadership was instrumental in coordinating these asymmetrical tactics, inspiring her soldiers to fight with unparalleled courage and determination. Her presence on the battlefield galvanized her troops, instilling in them a sense of purpose and resolve in the face of overwhelming odds.

Upon the enemy's incursion into the valley, the Rani's soldiers launched a courageous assault. Despite inflicting losses on both sides, the Rani's forces suffered disproportionately heavier casualties. As the Mughal army, led by Subedar Abdul Majeed

Asaf Khan, advanced into the valley, they encountered fierce resistance from Durgavati's troops, who were adept at utilizing guerrilla warfare tactics and exploiting the terrain to their advantage. Despite their numerical superiority, the Mughals found themselves at a disadvantage, unable to effectively engage the elusive enemy. The initial skirmishes between the two sides were marked by hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, and raids on Mughal supply lines orchestrated by Durgavati's forces. These tactics, which leveraged the element of surprise and the knowledge of the terrain, inflicted significant casualties on the advancing Mughals while allowing Durgavati's troops to maintain their defensive positions.

As the Mughal forces pressed forward, intent on breaking through Durgavati's defenses and capturing strategic locations in the valley, the intensity of the fighting escalated. The queen herself, leading from the front, inspired her soldiers with her unwavering courage and determination. Despite being outnumbered and outmatched in terms of conventional military strength, Durgavati's forces displayed remarkable resilience and tenacity in the face of adversity.

The battle reached its climax when the Mughals launched a concerted assault on Narai Nala, a key stronghold defended by Durgavati's troops. The queen's forces, entrenched within the natural fortifications of the area, repelled every Mughal attack with fierce resistance, inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy and frustrating their attempts to make headway. The ferocity of the fighting and the determination of both sides to prevail turned Narai Nala into a battleground of epic proportions. Despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them, Durgavati's forces refused to yield, holding their ground against wave after wave of Mughal assaults.

Rani Durgavati's forces, though outnumbered by the Mughal army, possessed a distinct advantage in their knowledge of the terrain and their mastery of guerrilla warfare tactics. Anticipating the Mughal advance, Durgavati deployed her troops strategically, utilizing the natural features of the landscape to their advantage. Ambushes, hit-and-run attacks, and raids on Mughal supply lines became the hallmarks of her defense strategy, inflicting significant casualties on the enemy while minimizing her own losses.

The Rani's dominion operated under a notably federal structure, characterized by a level of decentralization uncommon in many non-tribal kingdoms. Within her realm, there existed fortress districts serving as administrative units, overseen either directly by the monarch or through the governance of subordinate feudal lords, known as jagirdars, and junior rajas. Approximately half of the villages fell under the control of these feudal lords, who played a pivotal role in the kingdom's defense efforts. They not only recruited a significant portion of the army but also supplied arms to the sovereign during times of conflict. However, the decentralized nature of this structure led to disparities in recruitment standards, training, and equipment among the soldiers, often resulting in substandard capabilities. Furthermore, the influence wielded by feudal lords over segments of the army during wartime posed challenges during conflicts, including the one against the invading Mughals.

As the conflict intensified, the Rani consulted with her advisors to reassess her strategy. While she initially favored continuing with guerrilla tactics under the cover of darkness, her chiefs advocated for engaging the Mughal forces in open combat during daylight hours. However, by the following morning, the Mughal general, Asaf Khan, bolstered his forces with formidable artillery. Undeterred, the Rani, mounted atop her elephant Sarman, led her troops into battle. Her son, Crown Prince Vir Narayan, also

participated in the fray, valiantly driving back the invading Mughal army on three occasions before sustaining injuries that forced him to withdraw to safety.

During the course of the fierce battle, the Rani herself suffered grievous wounds, including a severe injury near her ear from an arrow and another piercing her neck, causing her to lose consciousness momentarily. Upon regaining awareness, she realized the imminent likelihood of defeat. Despite her mahout's urging to flee the battlefield, the Rani steadfastly refused, choosing instead to draw her dagger and take her own life on June 24, 1564. This act of ultimate sacrifice marked her martyrdom, commemorated annually as "*Balidan Diwas*."

In the end, while the Battle of Narai Nala did not result in a clear victor, it showcased the extraordinary courage, resilience, and strategic acumen of Rani Durgavati and her forces. Their valiant defense of the Narmada Valley against the might of the Mughal Empire became the stuff of legend, inspiring future generations to emulate their example in the fight against oppression and tyranny.

Conclusion

While historical accounts vary in their portrayal of Akbar, it is important to acknowledge that perspectives on his actions, particularly during the Battle of Narai Nala, may differ. However, some historical narratives suggest aspects of Akbar's behavior that could be interpreted as ruthless or oppressive, particularly in the context of his campaign against Rani Durgavati.

Akbar's decision to send forces to subjugate Gondwana could be interpreted as an unjustified intrusion into their sovereign territory. His refusal to recognize the autonomy and independence of local rulers like Rani Durgavati may have been perceived as an act of tyranny and oppression.

Furthermore, the use of superior military technology and overwhelming force by the Mughal army under the command of Subedar Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan could be seen as ruthless and unjust. The deployment of artillery and trained soldiers against a comparatively smaller and less equipped force led by Rani Durgavati might be viewed as an act of aggression aimed at crushing dissent and asserting imperial authority.

Additionally, the loss of life and suffering endured by the people of Gondwana as a result of the conflict could be attributed, at least in part, to Akbar's military campaign. The devastation wrought by warfare, the displacement of civilians, and the disruption of livelihoods may have been seen as unnecessary and unjustifiable by those affected.

Although the Battle of Narai Nala concluded without a clear victor, its significance transcends mere military outcomes, embodying the unwavering courage and resilience of Rani Durgavati and her valiant forces. The queen's indomitable spirit and strategic acumen not only earned her the adoration of her subjects but also commanded the respect of her adversaries. Despite their inability to decisively vanquish Durgavati on the battlefield, the Mughals acknowledged the formidable challenge she posed to their hegemony in the region.

The enduring legacy of the Battle of Narai Nala resonates as a potent symbol of resistance against oppression and despotism. Rani Durgavati's steadfast defense of her kingdom served as a beacon of inspiration for future generations, urging them to stand firm against foreign encroachment and uphold the sacred principles of sovereignty and self-determination. While the outcome of the battle may have resulted in defeat for Durgavati, her legacy as a warrior queen and an emblem of defiance remains eternally

enshrined in the annals of Indian history. Her legacy serves as a reminder of the indomitable human spirit in the face of adversity and tyranny, inspiring countless individuals to uphold the values of courage, resilience, and unwavering determination.

The legacy of Rani Durgavati, the valiant queen of Gondwana, transcends the confines of time and space, leaving an indelible mark on the annals of Indian history. Her courageous deeds, unwavering commitment to her people, and steadfast defiance against oppression have earned her a hallowed place in the hearts and minds of countless generations.

Rani Durgavati's legacy is one of resilience in the face of adversity. Despite the formidable challenges she encountered, from external threats to internal dissent, she remained resolute in her determination to protect her kingdom and uphold its sovereignty. Her unwavering courage on the battlefield, leading her troops into the fray against overwhelming odds, serves as an enduring testament to her indomitable spirit.

Beyond her martial prowess, Rani Durgavati's legacy is characterized by her dedication to the welfare of her subjects. Under her enlightened rule, the Gondwana kingdom experienced a period of unprecedented prosperity and cultural flourishing. She implemented policies aimed at alleviating poverty, promoting economic growth, and nurturing the arts and sciences. Her patronage of scholars, artists, and artisans created an environment conducive to intellectual and cultural development, leaving a lasting impact on the cultural landscape of the region.

Moreover, Rani Durgavati's legacy embodies the principles of sovereignty and self-determination. Her steadfast resistance against foreign aggression and insistence on preserving the autonomy of her kingdom serve as a poignant reminder of the importance of defending one's rights and freedoms. Her martyrdom on the battlefield, refusing to surrender to tyranny and oppression, symbolizes the ultimate sacrifice made in the pursuit of liberty and justice.

Through her exemplary life and deeds, Rani Durgavati continues to inspire generations of Indians to uphold the values of courage, resilience, and integrity. Her legacy serves as a guiding light in times of adversity, reminding us of the power of determination and the enduring strength of the human spirit. As we honor her memory, we reaffirm our commitment to the ideals for which she fought and sacrificed, ensuring that her legacy lives on for generations to come.

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