

Rani Durgawati: Voice of Heroic History

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Introduction

Ancient Indian feminine voices have a way of transforming mythology and recollections into a distinctive story that is equal parts folktale and fantastical. Oral and folk traditions preserve history by fusing memory with myth and magic, but occasionally, the character thus created transcends her true self. This tradition is best illustrated by one of the queens from India's medieval past, Gond Rani Durgawati (1524-1564) Known for her bravery and virility, she made a lasting impression on the local populace and came to represent resistance for those who were longing for fame and atonement. In local memory, the queen was elevated to the status of a goddess. However, what's most fascinating about this transformation of mythology is that the final avatar failed to embody the nuances of the complex historical figure fully. The historical Durgawati lost her layers and became a more one-dimensional goddess or freedom phoenix than what modern sources depicted her as.¹

It is a singular event that the Gond kingdom rose to power in eastern Narmadanchal. This kingdom's name and identity are derived from a particular place, namely Garha City, rather than from the name of the state of Gonds. It is referred to as Garha State in Sanskrit texts; Akbarnama also calls it Gadha-Katanga (a small village close to Garha); it is called Gadha-Mandla in English and Marathi texts. The most significant source for learning about the entire lineage of the Garha- Mandla kings is the Sanskrit inscription found at Ramnagar.²

Padmavati and Sumati were Sangramshah's two spouses. It is evident that Dalpatishah was Sangramshah's son, and the word "Padmavatimay" appears in his inscription. Given that Mother is referred to as "My," Padmavati can be easily accepted as Dalpatishah's mother. In the year 1542 AD, Dalpatishah and Durgawati tied the knot. "She (Durgawati) and Rath and the daughter of Chandel king Salbahan of Mahoba, that king married her to Dalpati, son of Amandas," according to Abul Fazl's clear statement. King Salbahan had no choice but to enter into this marriage because Dalapati, despite coming from a poor family, was a prosperous man." Durgawati is also referred to as Chandelvanshi in folklore. The Chandelas' superior caste status contributed to the Gond dynasty's rise to prominence and their eventual adoption of Hinduism. Modern arguments and discoveries point to the year 1543 AD as the date of his ascension to the throne. His son Veerananarayana was born in 1545. Dalpatishah selected Singorgarh as the capital; this fort, also known as Sinhadurg, is situated atop Vindhya's Bhandar mountain range. He passed away unexpectedly at the start of 1550 AD.³

Physiography- North Gondwana, which today includes the Madhya Pradesh districts of Jabalpur, Narsinghpur, Hoshangabad, Harda, Betul, Chhindwara, Seoni, Mandla, and Dindori,

was home to her medieval tribal kingdom, Garha Mandla, also known as Gadha Katanga. This land strip is bounded to the north by the Bhandar range and to the south by the Satpura range. It is also drained by the Narmada and Sonnerivers. It is located 20 kilometers from Mandla City (modern-day Madhya Pradesh) on the banks of the Narmada River.

Queen and Warrior Durgawati: Who became a Goddess in Local and Folk Traditions

India's veerangana, or braveheart, tradition and the steel-spined, battle-ready women it has produced over the years make for an intriguing example of how folktales and folk songs can turn memory into myth. Occasionally, this procedure results in the divination of a historical person whose valor and commitment to dharma have made them memorable in the eyes of the public. This is never more evident than in central India, the ancestral home of the Gond tribe, which was formerly known as Gondwana. Gond folk songs frequently make allusions to the past, relying on myth and memory to resist and reconstruct as much as to remember and honor. The tribal Gonds' sense of identity and communal pride are inextricably linked to their story. Being Gond means remembering, and among the most frequently recalled individuals in this land filled with samskara and itihasa is Gond Rani Veerangana Durgawati.

The memory of Rani Durgawati is ingrained in the minds of her people, Gonds and non-Gondhis alike. Even now, her magnificent reign and unwavering bravery remain essential elements of bard songs. That's not all that unusual in and of itself; community memory has always managed to preserve history and shield it from political spin-doctoring over the ages, from the exaltation of bards to hero stones in village temples. Bards sing of many Gond rulers besides Durgawati; two such rulers are Raja Shankar Shah and Raghunath Shah, martyred heroes of the 1857 rebellion, who are regarded with equal reverence. Like her, they are commemorated annually with pomp and circumstance on their day of martyrdom, known as Balidaan Diwas, which falls on September 18 and commemorates the day that British forces bound them to a cannon's muzzle and blew them up. They also have their memorial site, Samadhi Sthal, in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. But that's where the comparison ends. Not only is Rani Durgawati a role model for a monarch, but she is also a historical figure of glorious resistance. She shares the same divine status as her celestial namesake, the Goddess Durga, with her people. She transforms into the goddess herself in song after song, in folktales and temple customs, an embodiment of the fierce feminine so strong and fierce that she merits not only reverence but also respect.

Take this Gondi folk song which eulogises the queen for being Garha's protector and patron saint.

Tari nana, mor nana, rey nana

Rani Durgawati jo aaye. Mata Durga jo aaye.

Ran Ma jujhe dharey talwaar. Rani Durga kahaye. Tek.

Raja Dalpat key rani ho, Ran Chandi kahaye.

Dagar Dagar Ma dolon ho, Garh Mandla bachaye.

All hail the Queen Durgawati.

All hail the Goddess Mother Durga.

She is battle-ready with a sword in hand.

That's why she is called Rani Durga.

She is Raja Dalpat's queen and she's like Ran Chandi, an incarnation of Goddess Durga. She is everywhere and she protects Garha Mandla."⁶

According to history, the Gond queen resisted hostile neighbors' ideas of a wealthy kingdom headed by a woman by fighting valiant battles during her 15-year reign. Throughout her life, she engaged in over 50 skirmishes and never lost, except for her final, pivotal conflict with Asaf Khan, the senior general of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. She even prevailed in the first round of this battle and only lost the second because her generals disobeyed her orders to launch a night raid. It is not surprising that the Gonds view her as the macho counterpart of Ran Chandi, the goddess Durga. A different Gondi song urges her people to ask for her blessings, claiming that the goddess and the queen are the same.

Mata Durga Ran Chandi ke laybo charan pakhar

Hath jor binti karey ho, jay jay hovay tumhar.

Mother Durga is the incarnation

of the Goddess Ran Chandi.

We should cling to her feet.

Pray to her with folded hands for victory.

The queen's scholarship, her ability as a monarch, her kindness, and her beauty are discussed in modern secular references, but they do not equate an ideal queen with a goddess. That came about much later. An example of this can be found in the Ramnagar inscription from the mid-17th century in the Mandla district. It dates to the reign of Raj Gond king Hirde Shah, which was nearly a century after Durgawati's defeat at the Battle of Narai Nala. The inscription reads, "Samriddhireva swarupini purnyaparamparaiva sawbhagyasimaiva vasundharaya Durgawati tasya Babhuvapatni." Similarly, in the Sanskrit literary work Gadhes Nrupa Varnan Sangraha Slokah from the 18th century, poet Keshav Dixit describes Rani Durgawati as a queen full of virtue. The poem "Urbara sarvato bhumi madhyato Narmada nadi/Vigya Durgawati ragyi Garha rajye trayogunah" describes the queen and her country lyrically and effusively, but the poet makes it clear that the subject of

his effusion is still mortal, not divine. The kingdom of Garha is ruled by the learned queen Durgawati, whose realm is full of accomplishment.⁸

The bardic tradition, which emphasizes her valiant defense of dharma against a greedy invader—a point that chroniclers such as Abul Fazl and Ferishta bring up time and time again—remains distinct from more mainstream modern allusions. This also explains why Asaf Khan's invasion was attempted to be whitewashed by later Gond rulers who were already Mughal feudatories, but Asaf Khan and Akbar are still hated in the local memory for their roles in the queen's final sacrifice and the Mughals' desiccation of the golden gourd of Garha. When we compare how the Ramnagar inscription describes the Battle of Narai Nala with how it describes Akbar and Asaf Khan, we can see how folk traditions were able to filter out political revisionism. "Asaf Khan, with an army, was deputed by King Akbar, Puruhuta of the earth, all but compeer of Partha, to levy a contribution." In contrast, folk songs label Asaf Khan the enemy, a coward who repeatedly loses to the queen when faced with the belligerent courage of her soldiers. The inscription compares Akbar to Arjuna, Asaf Khan to Bheema, and the battle to a tax raid.

Naam Asaf dushmon kay, gayish dhari dhari haar

Saj dhaj kaya ave tisariya, fauji dharey hathiyar.

The enemy is called Asaf Khan and he lost his battle as the men of Garha wore their war gear and picked up their weapons.

But Durgawati's supernatural abilities support the song's twisted powerplay; she can target Akbar because, despite his might, he is only mortal and she is a goddess. He is strong at the moment. Hers are heavenly. Folk Songs of the Maikal Hills, a seminal work by Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale, documents a Gondi folk song from the 1940s that contains a similar example. Elwin and Hivale's translation of the song makes it apparent that the Gonds relied on Durgawati's heavenly abilities to support them during their time of need.

Be our help on the field of battle

The Mughal army is coming

The daughter, the queen of the world says

Listen, my little brother

Send for Indra's horse and arm it

And I will come with Sarada on my right-hand

And Hanuman on my left

We will kill a hundred thousand Mughals

Two hundred thousand Mughal soldiers

Three hundred thousand Emperors

Be our help on the field of battle

For the Delhi Sultan has attacked us."

Even when bards describe her battle readiness, Durgawati is referred to in deific form: "Chandi roop dhari Maharani dono haath talwar" (The queen is like Chandi, a fierce incarnation of Goddess Durga, and she is wielding a sword in each hand). Interestingly this bardic tradition continues to this day with modern-day Gond singers referencing the queen as a protector who saved the honour of her people. A recent song by DJ Sarman, for instance, says:

Garh Mandla raj chalaye Rani

Gondon ki laaj bajaye Rani

Mughlon se tu lari larai

Mughlon ko mar bhagaye Rani

She protected Garha Mandla and the honor of the Gonds

She fought the Mughals and drove them away.¹²

Durgawati's enduring divine aura also explains why locals used to bring lamp and incense offerings to her Samadhi Sthal, or memorial site, which is situated at the exact location in Jabalpur where she gave her life as a sacrifice on June 24, 1564, even up until the 1950s. Amar Singh, a servant from the village of Budra Pipriya, identified himself as "Durgawati ka sevak," or "Durgawati's servitor," and he offered prayers to an ancient idol of the queen, according to Mandla historian Ram Bharosh Agarwal. Lamp and incense offerings are still made to the newly renovated Samadhi Sthal in front of a small idol of Queen Durgawati and her beloved elephant Sarman. This is not the only instance of the queen being actively worshipped by her subjects. In addition to the phallic emblem of the Destroyer God, the inner sanctum of the Madwa Mahal Shiva temple in Chattisgarh, which is nearby, has an image of Rani Durgawati next to a picture of her celestial namesake, Goddess Durga or Parvati, who is also Shiva's consort.

The name Durgawati is also connected to holy customs that are purely secular. Red pennants, for instance, encircle the Sharada Mata temple in Jabalpur, which is close to Madan Mahal's hilltop palace. These are sown during the wet months of July and August, a clear allusion to the queen's conquest of her Malwa neighbor Baz Bahadur. Ever since Durgawati defeated him in battle and planted the first wish- fulfilling pennant, pilgrims flock to the temple annually to plant red pennants in remembrance of her legacy and to fulfill

their wishes. The queen's legacy has persisted in commonplace customs like these throughout Jabalpur, with local memory contributing everything from myth to magic to recall her tale. 13,14

The warrior empowering women from the Mughal period

The writings of Abul Fazl are crucial in providing date-specific information about Durgavati, in addition to local sources that describe her period. The young and inexperienced queen decided to place the minor Veera Narayan on the throne and rule the kingdom herself to preserve her husband's inheritance and the young son's succession. This was advised by Aadhar Singh Kayastha and Maan Brahmin. Abul Fazl goes on to say that he used his foresight to great effect. The queen's kingdom was stable when she assumed the role of Veera Narayana's patroness, but the unstable political climate in her immediate surroundings also had an impact on her. Generally, however, her relations with her neighboring states remained good. First of all, Veer Singh Dev was the same king who protected Aman Das in the Baghel state of the northeast, where Veerbhanu son of Veer Singh Dev was seated on the throne in Rewa. Despite sharing borders, the states of Garha and Rewa did not harbor any rivalry or hostility toward one another. The kingdom of the Kalachuris of Ratanpur in the southeast, the Muslim Sultanate of Berar in the southwest, the Gond kingdom of Chanda immediately south, the Miyana-Afghans at Raisen (led by Muin Khan in the Hoshangabad region), and the Delhi throne were all nearby. Still, the Survansh had the upper hand.

The Malwa area in the northwest of the Garha state was once the scene of fighting between Afghans and Rajputs. Shujat Khan was named governor of Malwa by Sher Shah. Sher Shah proclaimed independence as soon as he passed away, and his son Baz Bahadur succeeded to the throne in 1556. His goal was to subdue Gadha-Mandla. After his uncle Fatah Khan was killed in the first raid, he went back to Sarangpur. His soldiers were captured by the Gonds when he crashed into their army at the top of a pass as soon as he entered the fort. While fighting alongside Baz Bahadur Rani, the area was not conquered, but her bravery's light was felt all around. He was regarded as a guardian and protector by his subjects. In 1563, Kalyan Sahai, the Haihayvanshi ruler of Ratanpur, paid a visit to the Mughal court, demonstrating how much Akbar's authority had grown since the Second Battle of Panipat in 1556. The queen was suspicious of the way Baz Bahadur and Kalyan Sahay were acting, so she decided to fortify and secure the capital, establishing it at Chauragarh in the western region of the state atop the inhospitable high peak of Satpura. The emperor's interest in the fort-state grew after Kalyan Sahay visited the Mughal court and brought with him tales of the queen's prosperity and victory over Baz Bahadur. Legend has it that two scholars from Akbar's court, Gopa Mohapatra and Narhari Mohapatra, traveled to the Garha-Mandla kingdom and told Akbar the tale of the state's opulence and prosperity. The Diwan of Garha, Aadhar Singh Kayastha, most likely also made visits to the Mughal court.15

The historical records of the Mughal era contain all the information regarding this Garha-Mandla invasion. Following the 1556 Second Battle of Panipat, Akbar pursued an expansionist strategy. Following Baj Bahadur's defeat in 1562, the province of Malwa was annexed by the Mughal Empire. This marked the north-western boundary of the Garha kingdom. Abdul Majeed Asaf Khan, the Mughal Subedar of Kada-Manikpur, stood on the north-eastern boundary. The political necessity to subjugate that state and incorporate it into the Mughal Empire was heightened by the prosperity of the Garha Mandla state, whose northern border touched Mughal territory as well. Raja Ramchandra of Rath was vanquished by Abdul Majid Asaf Khan, the Mughal Subedar of Kada-Manikpur. At this point, its borders began to graze the state of Garha Mandla. Prahitahkarai bachayva asapafkhanastato ragna is what is written in the Ramnagar inscription. In other words, tax collection was under attack. Since Garha-Mandla was never a part of the Mughal Empire, there was no way to justify this and no basis for tax collection. The desire to grow the empire is illogical and morally dubious. Asaf Khan assembled cavalry on the emperor's orders and moved northward, towards Damoh, which is close to Jabalpur. The army of Asaf Khan had presumably grown in size by then, with both large and small chieftains joining the ranks. The queen was surprisingly ignorant of Asaf Khan's attack up until this point. Additionally, according to Abul Fazl, the queen was neglected. When the news of Asaf Khan's arrival in Damoh reached the Rani and her soldiers, they were shocked. The queen and her soldiers were at Singaugarh Fort, which is close to Damoh, and they had no time to react to the tragedy. The queen decided to fight despite having just 500 soldiers. Dewan Aadhar Singh Kayastha attempted to awaken the queen to the truth, but she chose to confront the enemy head-on and advance toward the Mughal army.

Meanwhile, Asaf Khan arrived in Damoh and began organizing his forces. The queen's advisors suggested that she pause temporarily and reorganize the army.

Taking the situation into consideration, the queen decided to accompany the army into the deep forests of the west. After a while, she reached Narhi (Narai), which is located in the southeast. It was a very challenging location. There are high-rise mountains around here and there are also two rivers, it was very difficult to enter and exit from here. Additionally, Abul Fazl describes the location as having a river called Gaur in front of it and tall mountains surrounding it. Conversely, there was the powerful Narmada River. The river's ravines made the road to the village extremely narrow and impassable." Asaf Khan was unprepared for the queen's move. He left a troop in Garha and proceeded toward his objective, the queen's halt; however, the subdivisions and the inaccessible forest region made his task challenging. When Rani Durgavati learned that Asaf Khan had arrived in the forest, she spoke to her officers and soldiers and declared that she would fight, no matter what the result, and that those who wished to depart could do so. The soldiers were inspired by the queen's courage and honor, and they also developed a war mentality. One end of that valley was taken over by a small Mughal force the following day. The enemy would be trapped in that small valley

if the queen decided to fight right away and gave her soldiers orders to wait until the enemy entered the valley. Although the queen's allies disagreed with him, she believed that the enemy should be attacked again in the darkness of the same night to win with Asaf Khan and artillery. The queen's strategy and courage were victorious, and she trusted her counselors. Asaf Khan fortified with artillery the following day, confirming the queen's fears. Mubarak Biluch, the queen, and her son Veeranarayana Shamskhan Miyana engaged in a valiant battle. Veera Narayana was removed from the battlefield safely after suffering injuries. The queen was still fighting with all of her vigor, but now she was the enemy's target when she rode Sarman's elephant. The issue with the queen and her elephant, as well as whether the wounded queen passed away from her dagger, are all poorly documented. The storms are still present at the current battle site.

In Abul Fazl's words, Asaf Khan triumphed and "got a thousand elephants and a lot of wealth and got the right over a vast area." Following this significant victory, Asaf Khan seized control of the fort; however, Chauragarh, the capital, remained outside the Mughal sphere of influence, with the wounded Raja Vir Narayan still residing there. Even after winning, Asaf Khan found it difficult to take control of Chauragarh for two reasons: first, he was perched atop an impenetrable mountain in the deep, and second, the second route was dangerous. Instead, he set up shop and organized himself in the fort before moving on to Chauragarh. As it has been previously documented, the soldiers of Asaf Khan were extremely wealthy Gond kings who were also extremely greedy and curious about this treasure due to Chauragarh's inaccessible state and perceived safety. By now King Veera Narayana had developed physical fitness and had prepared militarily as well, but he knew he could not match the Mughals in strength. However, that young valiant son of Veer Mata, aware of the circumstances, felt it was appropriate to confront the enemy and prepared to engage the army positioned there in combat. The women of the fort committed Jauhar, the Mughals conquered Chauragarh, Raja Veer Narayan became a martyr, and Kamalavati, the sister of Queen Durgavati and daughter of the Raja of Puragarh, was sent to Akbar's harem while she was still alive. Asaf Khan accomplished a great deal with this, and he gained enormous wealth from Chauragarh in the form of solid gold, coins made of gold, pearls, gems, etc. The Mughals took total control of the Garha Mandla kingdom in 1564 AD.^{17,18}

Rani Durgavati and her son possessed formidable, fearless, and assertive dispositions. The young queen was an adept administrator who used her minor son's coronation to her advantage to successfully rule the realm. Even with the news of Asaf Khan's approach (to Damoh), she remained unfazed, resolved to face the enemy with patience. Abul Fazl, who admires her bravery, adds that she consistently went hunting and used a gun to hunt animals. She refused to stray from her duty because she was not distracted by any impending crisis. Her loss also gave her a sense of completion, and once she attained her bravery, she became a historical heroine whose fearlessness and bravery serve as an example to everyone, but especially to women. ^{19,20}

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