

Dukaribala Devi-An Unsung Female Freedom Fighter from Birbhum

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Abstract: Dukaribala Devi of Birbhum's remote village Jhaupara is one of the unsung heroine of India's freedom struggle who showed agitation against British power. She was born in a middle-class Brahmin family on 22nd July , 1887 at Jhaupara village under Nalhati police station in Birbhum district in undivided Bengal. Dukaribala Devi's nephew, Nibaran Ghatak , was member of a revolutionary group and she was deeply influenced by the thoughts and concepts propagated by him and his group. The initiation of Dukaribala Devi into revolutionary mantra made Jhaupara a secret center of revolutionaries. The forested village on the banks of the river is therefore a suitable place for weapons training and for sheltering in secret. The movement of revolutionaries increased. She was now the unanimous 'Masima' (aunt) of all the revolutionaries of the group. She had to go to jail for two years for the crime of possessing weapons without a license that belonged to the revolutionaries.

Keywords: Dukaribala Devi, Jhaupara, Nibaran Chandra Ghatak, first Indian woman revolutionary convicted under the Arms Act in India during British rule, Masima

Women also participated in India's freedom struggle alongside men. No matter how small in number it is, it cannot be forgotten. Many of them left their happy homes and endured many insults. They have sacrificed a lot. Some have even met an untimely death. While many could not participate directly, they provided shelter and food for the revolutionaries, provided medical treatment, with love, compassion and sense of duty. Some cooperated by giving money, others by secretly maintaining weapons of the revolutionaries. Some have joined the organization and supported it in various ways. Overcoming the fear of brutal persecution by the British, many women participated in activities such as handing out secret petitions, participating in flag-carrying processions, etc. [1]

Dukaribala Devi of Birbhum's remote village Jhaupara is one of the unsung heroine of India's freedom struggle who showed agitation against British power. Most Indians have never heard of Dukaribala Devi nor are aware of her daring exploits a century ago, but it will suffice to say that there was a time when this lone lady's daring acts had terrorized the British regime. Dukaribala was the first Indian woman revolutionary who was convicted and imprisoned under the Arms Act in India during British rule. She was born in a middle-class Brahmin family on 22nd July , 1887 at Jhaupara village under Nalhati police station in Birbhum district in undivided Bengal. [2] Her childhood name was Dukaribala Chattopadhyay. Her education started in a pathsala at Jhaupara, the master was Harihar Dutta. Later she got her education from Sonarkundu Upper Primary school, a mile and a half away from the village. The master was Haripada Singh of Bautia. At the age of eleven , her parents , Neelmoni Chattopadhyay and Kamalakamini Devi got her married to Phanibhushan Chakraborty of the same village and that's where the intersection falls in her education. But due to some property problems in her father-in-law's house, Dukaribala started living in her father's house with her husband.

On 30 Ashwin 1312 Bangabda, Bengal was partitioned and there was great commotion in the villages and in 1312 Bangabda her eldest son Kalu was born on the day of Kojagari Purnima. Her husband then worked in the Railway Telegraph Office at Asansol as an apprentice after clearing the entrance examination from Rampurhat High School. In Paush or Magha month , he became very ill and resigned from work in the stormy wave of the anti-partition movement of Bengal and returned home. He was inspired by Swadeshi thinking. On returning home

, he attempted to burn the foreign cloth but was finally dissuaded from doing so by everyone's request. But secretly made Dukaribala swear by touching his feet never to use foreign goods in her life. To whom do you promise? In reply to this Dukaribala said, 'To my God, I will not forget this till death'. [3]

Dukaribala Devi's nephew, Nibaran Ghatak, was member of a revolutionary group and she was deeply influenced by the thoughts and concepts propagated by him and his group. Nibaran Chandra Ghatak later became a teacher at Searsole Raj High School. However, at the same time he studied coal mining management. [4]

Revolutionary period of 1914. On August 26, 1914 a shipment of fifty German Mauser Pistols and a few boxes of fifty thousand ammunition sent from abroad to Calcutta's famous arms R.B Rodda & co., went missing as planned by top leaders like Srish Chandra Mitra, Bipin Behari Ganguly of 'Atmonnati Samity'. The strength and morale of the revolutionaries of Bengal increased manifold by getting arms. Avoiding the police's keen gaze, the revolutionaries kept moving the weapons from place to place. In this way 7 Mauser pistols and 1200 rounds bullet are under the supervision of Ranendranath Ganguly, head of the Howrah branch, a prominent member of the Atmonnati samity. Then one day, thinking that it was no longer safe to keep those weapons there, a meeting of the Atmonnati samity decided to keep those weapons in the safe village shelter of Dukaribala Devi in Birbhum. Nibaran Chandra Ghatak informed his Masima (aunt) Dukaribala at Jhaupara about his decision and told her to make up her mind thinking about her husband, sons, family and future. On November 9, she agreed to Nibaran Chandra Ghatak and said – "She is ready to make any sacrifice for the country." Hearing about Dukaribala's determination, Nibaran Chandra came to Calcutta that night, handing over two pistols and some bullets to her. It was on Nibaran's cue that Roda's pistol and two boxes full of bullets came to the Jhaupara. From November 6th to November 10th, the extreme engagement of the Atmonnati Samity came to an end. However, the initiation of Masima into revolutionary mantra made Jhaupara a secret center of revolutionaries. The forested village on the banks of the river is therefore a suitable place for weapons training and for sheltering in secret. The movement of revolutionaries increased. Of course, the revolutionaries came first for flood relief. In 1913 there were severe floods in the rivers of South Bengal including the Damodar. Birbhum and its surroundings are also affected by floods. Bipin Behari Ganguly came with Nibaran Chandra for flood relief in the western part of Birbhum. It was at this time that initiation into revolution mantra was ripe for her. Bipin Behari Ganguly himself initiated. Later Jhaupara became a safe center of weapon training and became the hub of guerrilla activities. She was now the unanimous 'Masima' (aunt) of all the revolutionaries of the group. She diligently learnt to use pistols and other firearms from the revolutionaries.

After the pistols went missing along with the cartridges, the police searched day and night to find them. Police commissioner Tegart took the long letter he received at Chandannagar with him without giving it to the French authorities. In that letter there was an indication that the weapons were stored in Birbhum. 7th January 1917, the homestead area of Jhaupara was surrounded by the police force. Led by Circle Inspector Annadacharan Guha of Rampurhat and O.C of Nalhati Police Station. Before the dawn of the night, when she woke up, she heard a whispering sound. Ever since the weapon came home, her deep slumber had ended. When she wakes up, she checks the house and door. So she quietly opened the door of the room very carefully and walked towards the window in the dark, smelling strong tobacco. She put her ear to the door and heard the sound of boots and whispers. Anticipating the imminent danger, she made up her mind that "the weapons she kept with her, equal to the blood of the revolutionaries, must be protected at any cost. She wakes up the children with mental preparation for the coming battle and very cautiously informs them of the arrival of the police -- you will only cry if the police ask anything." After waking up the cowboy Panchkari Let of the house, with two boxes on his head, guarding herself like an armed soldier, she went up to Surdhani Mollani's house on the other side. She reassured herself by arranging to keep the boxes with Surdhani.

In the morning, in the presence of the union board president, zamindar, gomsta and some village elders, the police searched Dukaribala's ancestral house and found nothing objectionable. [5] When the police fail to return, a drunken traitor who had secretly observed Dukaribala's removal of weapons hints C.I.D Inspector Subodh Chandra Chakraborty to Surdhani's house in return for ten rupees. The police came and searched Surdhani Mollani's house and found everything. In a written interview given to the weekly newspaper Dhusarmati, Dukaribala said the following incident—

“The police took me and Surdhani to Rampurhat sub-jail along with the pistol box with cartridges. After some time I went to Siuri.”

On the same day (8th January 1917) Nibaran's house was also searched by the police as no illegal things were found in Nibaran's possession, he was arrested under the Defense of India Act, 1915 and taken to Burdwan. " They started threatening us a lot. But one thing, I have not seen or heard anyone except Nibaran. Nibaran says I don't know who, what was it. Friend Abanimohan Banerjee had left behind her deceased mother's ornaments and clothes etc. because I also knew that Abani died in Madhupur on 21st December and Nibaran also knew. But what I told the police, Nibaran also told the police the same thing.”

“ The police made many efforts to establish a case. But after getting nothing, Nibaran and I were ordered to jail for the crime of keeping guns without a license.”

Meanwhile, in the judgment given on March 9, 1917, two years of rigorous imprisonment was ordered for Dukaribala and five years for Nibaran Ghatak. [6] Dukaribala was the first Indian woman revolutionary who was convicted and imprisoned under the Arms Act in India during British rule. [7] She was a prisoner in the Presidency Jail. As a third-class prisoner in the Presidency Jail of Calcutta, Dukaribala Devi had to mill 20 kilograms of pulses every day. [8] Even in the unbearable conditions of prison life, she wrote to her family that she was fine, that they should not worry about her, that they should only look after the children, that the children should not cry. [9] At this time, the revolutionary Amarendranath Chattopadhyay's aunt Nanibala Devi, a widow from Bali, came to the Presidency Jail as a state prisoner. She met Dukaribala during her hunger strike in jail. She was shocked to hear about the work of Dukaribala. She decided in her heart that Dukaribala should be freed from this inhuman torture. Finally, with the efforts of Nanibala Devi , Dukaribala Devi was freed from the inhumane torture. [10]

How the 'village bride' of a conservative Brahmin family in Birbhum, a remote district of Bengal, was initiated into the revolutionary mantra in the first phase of the independence movement and how she was determined to jump into the fire of revolution, Dukaribala's short biography is a glorious history of it.[11]

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