



Sikandar Bagh Fort and A Fearless Worrier

Prof. (Dr.) Ranjana Rawat Head, Department of History
D.A.V. (P.G.) College, Dehradun
(Affiliated to H.N.B. Garhwal (Central) University, Srinagar (Garhwal))

Abstract

Sikandar Bagh fort was constructed on the orders of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, hardly a decade before the Revolt of 1857, for his favourite queen. Built primarily as a summer house which also acted as a place for cultural retreat, this partial enclosure of Lakhauri bricks housed a mosque, a garden and a small wooden pavilion for performers. During the first war of independence, this Bagh was converted into a strong hold that was meant to protect Awadh from falling into the hands of Britishers. The plastered mouldings of the lone-standing gateway, which has been efficiently preserved is a fine example of Lucknowi design and fish architecture. This gate's designs resembling Chikankary. Sikandar Bagh also stands as a testimony of cultural and architectural amalgamation of several designs from several traditions. It is important to describe the value of the heroine Uda Devi Pasi's Nationalism, in 1857 freedom struggle against Britishers in Sikandar Bagh. Uda Devi Pasi was an Indian Women Freedom fighter who participated in the war on behalf of Indian soldiers against the British East India Company, during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. She was commander of women's squad Begum Hazrat Mahal. Now Uda Devi Pasi is remembered for her skill as a leader who managed to mobilise people, specially women of marginalized community to take up arms against the British.

Keywords – Indian Rebellion, Sikandar Bagh, Sniper, Uda Devi Pasi

When the battle began in 1857, the revolt of a populace suppressed and exploited under the role of the British East India Company, the guns boomed their loudest in Delhi, Jhansi and the old city of Lucknow. There are many monuments of historical and archaeological values.

One such monument is Sikandar Bagh Fort, in what is now the civil lines areas of Lucknow. Sikandar Bagh Fort was built just 10 years before the revolt, as a cultural retreat for Wajid Ali Shah (1847-1856 AD), the last Nawab of Awadh. Sikandar Bagh was well laid garden of Wajid Ali Shah, constructed shortly after his coronation, for his favourite queen



Umrao called Sikanadar Mahal, the garden complex took a year and about 5 lakh rupees to build, spreading across an area of 137 square meters at that time. Inside a high enclosure of Lakhauri bricks decorated with plaster mounding sat a summer house, a mosque and a garden, with a small wooden pavilion in the centre of the garden, probably meant for cultural events like Kathak performances, music recitals and poetic mehfiles, given what a patron of the arts he was.

Of the complex's three lofty gateways, only one stands. The others collapsed amid heavy bombardments during the Revolt of 1857. The gateway that remains, however is beautifully preserved, and a stunning example of Lucknowi design. Inside, it is covered in precoes resemble the city's iconic chikan embroidery. These are itched by the court painter Kashi Ram. The Nawab was so happy with the artist's work here, in fact, that he conferred upon the latter a Khillat or robe of honour after he saws the finished product.

The gateway's exterior is testament to the cosmopolitan history of this city of art and culture. Its architecture incorporates elements of Indian, Persian, European and Chinese design in the form of arches, pediments, chhatris, pillars and pagodas. The fish motifs called the Mahi Moratib, popular with the Mughals as a badges of great honour, is also visible.



But, what was built as a place of rest and recreation would soon be witness to horrific blood shed. In 1856, the Nawab was deposed by the British East India Company on grounds of alleged mala administration and lawlessness, and Awadh annexed to the British Empire. Wazid Ali Shah and his entourage were exiled to Metiabruz in Calcutta. The resentment this caused among his people, who loved him, was one of the sparks that to Lucknow becoming such as centre of the Revolt. Leading the charge was the Nawab's second wife, Begum Hazrat Mahal.

The local British officials and population barricaded themselves inside the Lucknow Residency (collection of buildings), which the Indian revolutionaries quickly laid siege to. The Sikandar Bagh was used during the Indian Rebellion during their siege of the British Residency in Lucknow as one of the many fortresses of sepoy mutineers.

The Sikandar Bagh stood in the way of the commander-in-chief Sir Colin Campbell's planned route to relieve the besieged Residency. On the morning of 16th November, 1857, while passing on its eastern side in a sunken lane, British forces were taken by surprise amid heavy artillery fire from within Sikandar Bagh. The British troops were trapped, incapable of advancing. So rather than try and get past, they decided to try and get in.

Still under fire and with great difficulty, the British breached the walls, creating a break just wide enough for one person to pass through at a time. There followed a protracted hand-to-hand battle and the main body of about 2000 Indian revolutionaries was slowly pushed back, eventually seeking refuge in the two-story Kothi or living quarters originally built for use by the Nawab.

The revolutionaries had expected an attack from the opposite side and had bricked up the rear door. In doing so, they had blocked their own retreat. After a long struggle, they were all slain, their bodies buried in a deep trench. Lord Roberts, a British military commander of the time who witnessed this event, later recalled, "Inch by inch they were forced back to the pavilion, and into the space between it and the north wall, where they were all shot or bayoneted. There they lay in a heap as high as my head, a heaving, surging mass of dead and dying inextricably entangled. It was a sickening sight, one of those which even in the excitement of battle and flush of victory, make one feel strongly what a horrible side there is to war."

The British had been so enraged by the killing of their own, including women and children, during the sieges of Cawnpore and the Lucknow Residency, that elephants were later used to drag the bodies out of Sikander Bagh, so the dead Indian revolutionaries could be tossed in a shallow ditch they had earlier dug themselves, near the north wall, to reinforce their defences.

A little known detail here involves a fierce woman rebel called Uda Devi Pasi, who fought with great valour at Sikander Bagh. Born in Ujariyan Villages of Lucknow district of that time Awadh (Uttar Pradesh), in a family of marginalised community. Surrounded by rebels and bereft of adequate supplies, the small British contingent teetered on the edge of annihilation throughout the summer of 1857. In November, General Colin Campbell broke through the enemy lines and managed to save the trapped garrison. This was the "second relief of Lucknow" during which Campbell's 93rd Highland Regiment advanced along the southern bank of the Gomti river, proceeding towards the palace of Sikander Bagh.



Uda Devi Pasi was wife of Makka pasi, a soldier in Emperor's regiment, little is known about her, except that there as a Pasi community in Avadh region and the site of the Pasi Fort still exists in withing the city. Uda Devei Pasi's women brigade comprised mainly the women from lower castes or the downstrodden but their bravery and valour was something to look upto, and the war of 1857 can never be talked about without the mention of Uda Devi Pasi and brave women in Awadh. A statue of Uda Devi Pasi at Sikandar Bagh makes her immortal, though very few know about her heroic valore still over in the city. My aim in this research work is to bring all valore of Uda Devi Pasi to the every citizen of state as well as nation. She was determined to contribute to the cause of Nationalism and approached Begum Hazrat Mahal to offer her help. The Begum, recognizing her potential, helped Uda Devi Pasi form an all women battalion. On seeing the British army approached Sikandar Bagh, she climbed up a Banayn tree, disguised as a man, and took armed killing 32 British soldiers.

Thus Uda Devi Pasi, become a vital part of the armed resistance. As her husband died in another battle she vowed to avenge him, and she did, losing her own life in the process. Battle of Sikandar Bagh, also brought forth the power and valore of women soldiers in Lucknow. Uda Devi Pasi (a sniper) positioned herself with a gun on a peepal tree and shot many from the British side. It was a very late that her position was discovered and she was then shot dead, but not before she has taken many British lives aiming from the tree branch and firing on the head of British soldiers, who passed from the area.



A British officer, noticing the many dead, suspected a sniper was riding in a tree. British officers shot into the trees and to everyone's surprise woman Uda Devi – fell down, dead, Her body riddled with bullet wounds. It is documented that even British officers like Campbell bowed their heads over her head body, in recognition of her bravery.

The horrors didn't end here. The common grave that the rebels were tossed into was a shallow that vultures attacked the corpses. One famous photograph of that time was clicked by an Italian

photographer Felice Beats, who visited India during the revolt of 1857. The historic picture depicted piles of human skeletons lying around Sikander Bagh. Historians note that British officials did not allow families to take away their dead and perform last rites.

A cannon ball, swords, shields and musket parts dug out of the garden over time are now on display at the National Botanical Research Institute in Lucknow. Cannon ball marks on the garden's old walls still bear witness to the events of that violent day. Today, one side of the Bagh is used as the office of National Botanical Research Institute and the otherside is protected under ASI where one can still see one of the surviving gates of the Sikander Bagh. Uda devi Pasi is indeed an inspiration, especially to women from non-dominant. befittingly, on November 16th each year, the members of her Pasi community gather at the site of her fall and celebrate her as a brave rebel, who defied all odds to take British lives, for a cause. It has been over a century since she was martyred, yet the memory of her sacrifice is kept alive by her community, which celebrates her unwavering and courageous spirit. Uda Devi Pasi is also one of the inspiration behind and all women battalion of the Uttar Pradesh Provincial Armed Constibulary. The raising of women PAC battalions is an excellent step towards empowering the women from the weaker section of society and it is only fitting, that one of the Units, derives its name from a „Sniper or Veerangna like Uda Devi Pasi“.

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