

Rani Durgavati

The Warrior Queen of the 16th Century

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You must be familiar with the Battle of Haldighati fought between Maharana Pratap and the Mughals. But have you ever heard the story of a brave Rajput-Gond queen who chose suicide over surrender before the enemies? No? Probably because history has always been more inclined towards tracing the bravery and valour of their male counterparts. So much so that these strong, inspirational women remain hidden between the lines, or in a few vague references at best. In this article we will trace the life details of one such braveheart, Rani Durgavati. Born in 1524 in the Banda district of Uttar Pradesh, she was the daughter of Keerat Rai, a descendant of the Chandella Rajputs. Most famous for the building of the temple complex at Khajuraho, the Chandella rulers were strong warriors who successfully managed to repulse several invasions, the one by Mahmud of Ghazni being the most famous. Having spent her childhood listening to these tales of bravery and valour, Durgavati too imbibed the same spirit within her. It is of little surprise then that she was trained in hunting, archery and horse riding from a very young age, interested in mastering the skills typically associated with a warrior. So much so that the historical records list trophy hunting as one of her favorite pastimes. Even Abul Fazl mentions here as being good with both gun and arrow.



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As she turned 18, her family decided to marry the princess off. A suitable match was found in Dalpat Shah, king of the Gond Dynasty of Madhya Pradesh. The Gondwana kingdom in those times comprised the eastern part of Vidarbha, some parts of western Chhattisgarh, northern Telangana, western Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and parts of southern Uttar Pradesh. The strategic location of this kingdom arrested the expansion of the Mughal dynasty to the south of the subcontinent. Political experts see this more as a political alliance, rather than a matrimonial one, as marriage between the Gonds and Rajputs was rare in those times. Whereas other accounts hint at Durgavati choosing Dalpat Shah as her husband, being impressed by him after hearing stories of the courage he displayed when facing the Mughals. On the inhibitions displayed by her family and her guru regarding the suitability of this match, Durgavati is said to have replied, "He might be a Gond by birth, but his deeds make him a Kshatriya." [1] This sole decision stands as a prime indicator of her far-sightedness as the alliance between the powerful Chandellas and Gonds definitely played a major part in keeping the Mughal rulers in check for a very long time. For when Sher Shah Suri launched an attack on the Chandellas, the Gond army joined forces and successfully resisted the attack.

Soon after her marriage to Dalpat Shah, Durgavati gave birth to their son Vir Narayan in 1545. But fate had something else in store for this family as Dalpat Shah died, leaving behind his wife and five year old son. With the heir being too young to be crowned king, Durgavati took the reins of control in her hand as Queen regent. This proved to be a turning point in her life as she continued to increase the power and prestige of the Gond kingdom. Under the guidance of experienced and trustworthy ministers like Adhar Simha and Man Thakur, Durgavati kept expanding the territories of the Gond kingdom, much to the surprise of the neighbouring kings who assumed that a female ruler would turn out to be an easy target. She instead is said to have maintained a large army of 20,000 cavalry, more than 1000 war elephants and a substantial infantry. [2] Alongside ensuring the protection of the people living in her kingdom, Durgavati also focussed on constructing new structures for their benefit, like the Ranital water reservoir near Jabalpur. She also took some significant administrative decisions during her reign. She efficiently managed and controlled production in the approximately 23,000 cultivated villages within her domain, which rendered the kingdom self-sufficient in its food requirements. Her decision to shift the capital from Singorgarh fort to Chauragarh fort, which lay towards the east on the Satpuras, infuriated the king of Malwa, Baz Bahadur. He decided to launch an offensive on Durgavati's kingdom, only to return with huge losses.

A few years down the line, the already weakened kingdom of Baz Bahadur was annexed by Akbar, resulting in the Mughal empire touching Gondwana territory from both sides now, as Mughal general Asaf Khan had already established control over

Rewa. As expected Akbar's army turned towards the strategic kingdom of Gondwana next. Akbar was impressed by her courage and even wanted to even meet her, not as an equal but as a warlord to bestow gift and honours upon her. He also sent emissaries to the Chauragarh fort to ask Rani Durgavati to surrender before the Mughal army, but instead she chose to fight. Historical sources quote her as telling the Diwan Adhar Simha, who was also in favour of surrender at this point of time, that "Better to die with dignity than live without self-respect. I have served my motherland for a long time, and at a time like this, I won't let it be stained. There is no option but to fight." [3] Abul Fazl rather saw this as her arrogance than bravery and writes in his Akbarnama that, 'the Rani had one great fault, to wit, she, owing to a crowd of flatterers, became proud of her outward success, and did not submit herself at the threshold of the Shahenshah.' [4] As expected, Akbar got infuriated on hearing this and sent his ablest general Asaf Khan to invade Gondwana. She put up a brave fight, her familiarity with the terrain of Narrai Nala (a village in Jabalpur, surrounded by a hilly range and rivers Gaur and Narmada) helped her initially. She even succeeded in retreating the superior Mughal army and wanted to continue the offensive through the night. But her generals suggested otherwise, and this turned out to be fatal for the queen and her army. Even the slightest chances of victory did not break her indomitable spirit as Durgavati continued to fight till she was severely shot by arrows, one piercing her neck and the other her ear. The wounds were so deep that the only two choices in front of her were to either flee from the battlefield or surrender before the enemies. Both of which were not to her liking, and so, she decided to take control of the situation and stabbed herself with a dagger.

Rani Durgavati decided to write her own fate. Being the fighter that she was all her life, she wanted people to remember her that way even after death. Needless to say that she did succeed in her endeavour. Durgavati successfully fought a total of 51 wars in her reign of 16 years against the several neighbouring kingdoms and invading armies, including the Mughals, who attacked thrice. The only thing common in all



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these battles was the immense fearlessness and self-belief displayed by her. She has left behind a legacy of courage and determination. Durgavati died on 24th June 1564, commemorated as 'Balidan Diwas' by the Indian government, a day to remember the extreme sacrifice made by the Rani to save her motherland. Her tomb, represented by two large rounded stones, still lies at the place where she fell. A museum has been established in her name and memory (Rani Durgavati Museum, Jabalpur), housing sculptures and artefacts significant to the history of this land, with a sculpture depicting Rani Durgavati riding an elephant, alongside paintings illustrating her life and times. The Madhya Pradesh government also decided to rename the University of Jabalpur as Rani Durgavati University in 1983.

Rani Durgavati proved that she was a warrior in blood and spirit. Though she faced defeat at the hands of the Mughal army, her story is an inspiration for all. From early in her life she refused to attest to the conventional gender norms and carved a niche for herself. She continues to remain a legendary figure in Indian history, who chose death with dignity over a life of surrender and defeat.

References:

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