



Revisiting History Through Folk: A Study of Folk Songs Concerning the Uprising of 1857

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It was in May 1857 that the seeds for uprooting the vulpine foreign rule bore fruit when a band of discontented sepoys embarked upon the streets of Meerut with a unanimously agreed objective to eradicate the British rule from the Indian soil. The British narratives concerning this Uprising of 1857 in northern India have been echoed in the literary circles ever since the performance of the play *Keereda and Nena Sahib* at the Victoria Theatre in November 1857. Unfortunately, because of reasons like maintaining the secrecy of the planning associated with the Uprising and the associated risk of being seized for penning down the events after being defeated, there exists a lamentable lack of historic and literary accounts of the Indian faction concerning the said event. It is in this context that the folk songs become a valuable reservoir for deducing the Indian perspective about the Uprising of 1857. Their supreme value lies in the fact that they constitute a very authentic record of the outlook of the people whom they portray. Echoing and admiring the cherished virtues of bravery, courage and self-sacrifice, these folk songs are like a rich gold mine waiting to be excavated. Coming from the pen of likes of Surajmal, Dhawal Ram, Bhartendu, Badri Narain Chaudhuri etc, these folk songs act as a first-person account of soul-stirring turn of events in the year 1857. This paper attempts to delve into the ways in which these folk songs have lived, grown and sustained their identity among Indian population by being an important but scarcely referred part of Indian patriotic poetical heritage and also the manner in which their popularization would enrich Indian literature.

Acting as a big shot to the imperialism of the nineteenth century, the Uprising of 1857 holds a pivotal place in Indian popular memory as the central signpost against the mighty colonial empire. Ignited and propelled by almost every strata of the contemporary Indian society, this event stands testimony to the will of the Indian populace which projected itself as indestructible even in the face of mighty aggression and power politics from the 'too big to fail' British empire. It was infact a

culmination of long imposed political, administrative, social and cultural suppression which was meted out to the Indians after their defeat in the battles of Plassey and Buxar. The way the British ruled with an iron hand, their imposed mannerisms, their intent of depreciating the value and importance of Indian industries and their general feeling of distrust and disgust towards the native population, all resulted in Indians taking up arms against their foreign masters.

Was the Uprising of 1857 spontaneous and unplanned or was it a result of careful and secret organization? The answer to this question cannot be given with certainty as multiple theories have been in circulation about the emergence of this great Uprising. A peculiar aspect of the study of the history of the events of 1857 is that it has to be based entirely on British records. The rebels have scarcely left behind any records. As they had to plan against the existing administrative and political authority, keeping any record would have meant risking one's own skin. Moreover, they were defeated and their version of events died with them. Another reason for this near absence of native narratives is the fact that for years afterwards, the British violently suppressed any favourable mention of the Uprising, and took strong action against anyone who tried to mention the rebels' side of the story. We have some records of circulation of ideas prior to the outbreak and the medium of communication in this case was *chappattis* and red lotuses. Propaganda by wandering *sanyasis*, *faqirs* and *madaris* is also of some significance to get a hint of planning at a very localized and marginal level. Generally, the absence of any planning is propagated on the basis that not a scrap of paper was discovered before or after the Uprising indicating an organized conspiracy, nor did a single witness come forward to make such a claim. Such views give way to the thought that this entire episode of history can be attributed to the immediate cause of the greased cartridges. A story became popular in those days:

In January last, a classic (a workman) of low caste, asked a sepoy of the 2nd Grenadiers to supply him with water from his 'lota'. The Brahmin refused on



the ground of his superior caste, and that the 'lota' would be defiled by the other's touch. The 'classie' re-joined that he need not pride himself on his caste for he would soon lose it as he would ere long have to bite cartridges covered with the fat of cow and pig. The Hindoo, horror-stricken, told the story to his comrades; the report spread, and the men everywhere were afraid that when they went home their friends would refuse to eat with them. (Campbell, 4)

In such paucity of native historical and fictional narratives about this Uprising, folk songs become a very authentic source of information. For the Indian historians of today, these folk songs on 1857 are very important as guides to the political experience, outlook and aspirations of our common people during and soon after the 1857 Uprising (Joshi, ix). Since ancient times, folk art forms have occupied a central stage for approaching the masses in India and the organizers of the 1857 Uprising effectively used the same for circulating the message of rebellion among the native population. In support of such local folk art forms, British historian John William Kaye has observed that:

There were two subjects which the *Kathputleewallas* (puppeteers) extremely delighted to illustrate- the degradation of the Mughal and the victories of the French over the British, the one intended to excite hatred, the other contempt in the minds of the spectators. (Kaye, 246)

Against this background and the associated legacy of expression and circulation of ideas through folk art forms, the folk songs on 1857 are in more ways than one an indispensable part of our rich national heritage. From the very initial stages and progressing towards the full involvement in the struggle, various art forms like *Panwadas* (ballads) like that of *Alha Udal*, *Lawaniyas* (folk musical art form used for stirring softer emotions), etc., were employed across the length and breadth of northern India with a motive to stir the emotions of the common populace. Folk songs concerning the Uprising of 1857 were also a part of this very motive. These songs breathe and infuse self-confidence among the masses and the soul-stirring incidents which they so profoundly weave are a heritage to be nurtured.

The aspirations of the insurgents were for the first time reflected in the flag song of 1857 which was composed prior to the Uprising broke out in May 1857 called the 'Qaumi Tarana'. It was first published in the contemporary, *Payami Azadi*. Its translation is as follows:

To us belongs our Hindustan
and to none else

Our sacred motherland
dearer than heaven
The world is aglow
with the light of her soul.
How old, how new
and unique of its kind
To us belongs our Hindustan
And to none else

Ganga and Jamuna making
our lands fertile
And overhead the snow-clad mountain
our sentry towering.
Beating against the coasts below
the trumpets of the seas
And gold and diamonds from our mines
overflow.
Our pomp and splendour evoking the
envy of the world.

And then came the Firangi
and such magic spell he cast
Pillaging and plundering our motherland
he ruled.
The martyrs call you, O countrymen
do you hear?
Smash up the chains of slavery
and pour out fire
Hindus and Muslims and Sikhs-
all of us brothers.
Hail and Salute it,

Here is our flag of freedom!(Joshi, xv)

The flag song of 1857 has a two-fold significance. Firstly, the zeal and vigour that it beholds is the bed rock on which the future struggle for Independence rests. Secondly, it acts as a valid counter argument for those historians who have advanced the thesis that there was no national sentiment in India of 1857 and that the insurgents were not moved by patriotic ideas (Joshi, xvi). A close scrutiny of the turn of events in 1857 India helps us deduce that the material for ignition was all ready and was awaiting a spark to be burst. This material is reflected in the way the year 1857 is portrayed in a folk song by a bard named Dhawal Ram:

That was in the year Fourteen¹
In Meerut it all begun.
Presidencies Badal,² Karapat,³ Bengal
already vast areas span.
But the Firangi,⁴ bedevilled by fate impending
struck on an evil plan.
For the terrible Goddess Kali⁵ was
to engulf Vilayat's⁶ domain.
New cartridges carried he fat and grease
of cows and pigs



And the Sipahce⁷ in bitter revolt was,
firing away his guns.
Says Dhawal Ram⁸: the Angrez from Calcutta
Sneaked out in the year fourteen!(Joshi, 7)

The near accurate detailing that these folk songs provide, add to their reliability as the carriers of historical material across ages. The Uprising saw its first outbreak in Meerut with the killing of first British Officer named Colonel Finnis, commander of the 11th Native Infantry. Then began the killings of Europeans across northern India. The terror that ensued finds mention in the following words:

Flames began to ascend in all directions from the officers' bungalows, from public buildings, mess house, private residences, and, in fact, every office of thing that came within reach of the torch and the fury of the mutineers, and of the bazaar *canaille*, who in considerable numbers joined the rising. (Campbell, 14)

The way this folk song talks about the grievances of the masses and keeping in mind the general tone of the flag song of 1857, the historians have generally come to the point that the outbreak was something which could not be ignored altogether. The national political character of the Uprising becomes clear from the fact that the then British Governor-General Lord Canning who characterized it as 'Sepoy Mutiny' at first, was soon referring to it as a 'rebellion' and a 'revolt'. (Joshi, ix)

Even British historians have pointed out at the great sense of fear that encapsulated the British residents in India. They made efforts to conceal their identities and forge their belongingness in order to save their lives. The folk-song below describes the picturesque detailing of the resistance that took place in the streets of Meerut. It is from the Brij area:

Oh come and look!
In the Bazar of Meerut,
The Firangi is waylaid and beaten!
The whiteman is waylaid and beaten!
In the open Bazar of Meerut
Look, oh look, (He is beaten)
His gun is snatched
His horse lies dead
His revolver is battered.
In the open Bazar
He is waylaid and beaten
Look, oh look!
The firangi is waylaid and beaten
In the Bazar of Meerut
Look, oh look! (Joshi, 9)

The constant highlighting of the fact that the Englishman lies defeated surfaces more than once in this song. Full of self-glorification, this song is a peculiar reflection of the common conscience of the masses who felt victorious seeing the British being defeated. The saga that began with the killing of Colonel Finnis, gained momentum thereafter. Colonel Smyth, commanding the 3rd Light Cavalry, had a stern decision on the use of greased cartridges. The sepoys who refused to accept the new cartridges were sentenced to hard labour for 10 years (23 April) and on May, 9, the convicted sepoys of the 3rd Light Cavalry were publically stripped of their uniform, fetters were hammered on their ankles, and then sent to jail. (Llewellyn, 157) The humiliation to which these sepoys were subjected and the way they were publically defamed, fumed an air of resistance in their body and it got reflected in the form of equally brutal retaliation which was meted out to the British in India. The folk song below reflects this sentiment of retaliation:

Other folk amassed in the loot
Shawls, oh such shawls!
My love, he looted kerchiefs only
There's your Sadar Bazaar¹⁹ of Meerut!
Oh, my love's so inept
in this business of looting!
Other folk amassed in the loot
such plates and bowls!
My love, he looted glasses only.
There's your Sadar Bazaar⁹ of Meerut!
Oh, my love's so inept
in this business of looting!
Other folk amassed in the loot
such dates and coconut!
My love, he looted groundnuts only.
There's your Sadar Bazaar^{of Meerut!}
Oh, my love's so inept
in this business of looting!
Other folk amassed in the loot
such coins of gold!
My love found copper chhadams¹⁰ only!
There's your Sadar Bazaar^{of Meerut!}

Oh, my love's so inept
in this business of looting! (Joshi,

11)

Since the beginning of the Uprising, the incidents in India influenced European literary imagination. The sole aim of these texts was to present the Indian rebel leaders in a horrific detail and consequently gather the sympathy for the British in India. Martin Tupper, Christina Rossetti and Lord Tennyson wrote poetry about the Mutiny. The socialist leader Ernest Jones produced a long,



and rather rambling, poem unabashedly titled 'The Revolt of Hindostan'. Mary Leslie published *Sorrows, Aspirations and Legends from India*. (Nayar, 234) Even the British historical narratives are full of incidents where the horrors inflicted by Indians are detailed in an elaborate detail. The incident where the British flee from Delhi and seek a safe harbour to protect their lives, finds mention in detail. After falling into rebel hands, the 'havoc' which was created, was of magnificent magnitude according to the historical records of Sir Colin Campbell:

We perceived a broken down mud hut at a little distance. Into this we crept and lay down; while there, as there, as the sun rose, we perceived a party of sepoys and others advancing towards us...I remember saying, "Oh, Colonel, death is better than this horrible suspense;" (Campbell, 26)

Undoubtedly this terror was felt in every heart and soul. Jhansi was not an exception to it. The folk history of Jhansi is abundant with folk songs singing of her valour and the kind of respect she received from the warriors of her clan. Her chief gunner, Ghulam Gaus Khan and one of his great friends, Khudadad Khan, together guarded the main gates of Jhansi fort. Both of them sacrificed their lives at British hands. Following are the last words of Khudadad Khan, which are often sung as a song of glory and sacrifice:

We have to die one day, brother
and I shall choose today
For our queen I shall lay down
my life,
I shall hack the Firangis with my sword
And the world will forever
remember me! (Joshi, 49)

The Rani of Jhansi is still recalled as a symbol of courage and valour in popular folk narratives, novels. She commanded a place which only few can partake and displayed characteristics which were quite contradictory to the nickname which she was given- 'Chhabeli'. Her image was different from the image of the feudal society she lived in. Infact it was critical of it. She thought and worked beyond the constructs of status, gender, religion etc. and preferred following the doctrine of equality. Following is a very popular folk song which describes her courage:

fought
How valiantly like a man she
The rani of Jhansi!
On every parapet she set a gun
Raining fire of hell,

Jhansi,
How well like a man fought the Rani of

How valiantly and well!

On pastry and sweets the sipahee she fed,
while the Rani of Jhansi,
herself did eat only parch'd wheat
with a little jaggery

How well like a man fought the Rani of Jhansi,
How valiantly and well!

From the raging battle-field
New line dying of thirst
She had rushed to Lashkar,
The Rani of Jhansi.

Where no one brought her the cup of water
She sought in vain.

O how like a man fought the rani of Jhansi
With dauntless mien! (Joshi, 47)

The refrain of the song, *Khoob lari mardani Jhansiwali Rani* became the source for Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's famous poem and thus it received an even wide reading.

These folk songs coming from the pen of very talented folk poets sing of the extreme courage of the participants of the great Uprising of 1857. They are a reservoir of the minute happenings of the said event and celebrate the legacy of an episode which subsequently inspired the national liberation struggle. These folk songs, hitherto unacknowledged, constitute an important part of our collective heritage and their heart-warming music is a rich gold mine of Indian poetical lineage. They act as a means for expressing homage to those who lost their lives and for extending appreciation for those who expressed it as folk narratives to be cherished for eternity. The Indian fictional narratives concerning the Uprising of 1857 are much and varied and their proper acknowledgement is the key to excavate the historical glory of the year 1857.

Notes

1. References to the Samvat year of the Vikrama era corresponding to 1857
2. Bombay
3. Madras
4. Foreigner, white-man
5. Goddess of destruction
6. Foreign land, here England
7. Indian soldier
8. The bard and author of this song



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