

DURGA BHABHI; THE AGNI OF INDIA: A REVOLUTIONARY LEGEND

Kulwinder Kaur¹, Isha Sharma², Daljit Kaur*

¹Mata Sundri College for Women, Department of History, Delhi, India

²Mata Sundri College for Women, Department of History, Delhi, India

*Mata Sundri College for Women, Department of History, India

*Corresponding Author Email: daljitkaur@ms.du.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The revolutionary movement in the United Provinces and Punjab, which emaciated in activity in the years 1928–1932, is often thought of in inherently gendered terms, and as being reinforced by a masculine agenda of revengeful anti-colonial violence. This paper attempts to analyse the layers of masculinity attributed to the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), through a study of the life of Durga Devi Vohra (1907–1999), more popularly known as ‘Durga Bhabhi’, ‘The Agni of India’, the young mother who famously supported the escape of the prominent HSRA member, Bhagat Singh, from Lahore succeeding his involvement in the murder of a British policeman in 1928. The article pushes beyond this much-celebrated incident, to prove the astonishing roles played by women, not only as wives and mothers of male revolutionaries, but as activists. This paper focuses on the gendered outlines which prevailed in HSRA. Furthermore, it discusses one of the crucially infamous incidents in the life of Durga Devi ‘The Lamington Road Outrage.’ The paper concludes by saying that women took up revolutionary roles at all stages and was often interpreted in the 1930s as a sign of how domineering the government had become and that they were willing to leave from their expected roles. Mostly, the narrations mentioned later in this paper are based on censored sources and interviews which were preserved at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library’s Oral History Project in 1972.

Keywords: Durga Bhabhi, Hindustan Socialist Republican Association, Gender, and Revolutionary legend.

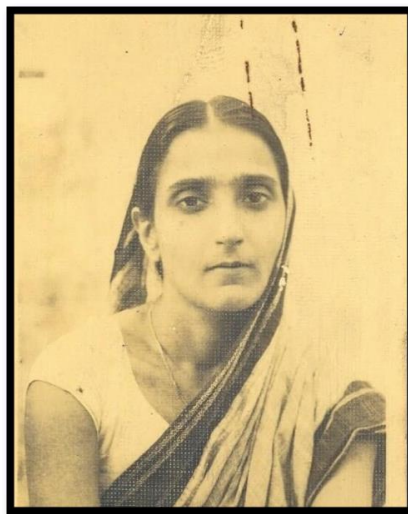


Fig 1. Devi Vohra (Durga Bhabhi)-1907-1999

INTRODUCTION

Little information exists of the contributions made by women to the secret activities of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), the revolutionary organisation formed by Chandrashekhhar Azad and Bhagat Singh in 1928 to oppose the British and strive towards socialism’s emergence in India. The HSRA’s activities have in fact become increasingly distinct more in Indian popular culture than has been studied in History. Women’s role has been concealed in these popular depictions of revolutionary nationalist activities.

Durga Devi Vohra, also known as Durga “Bhabhi ”was born on Monday, October 7th, 1907, married to Bhagwati Charan Vohra. Durgawati Devi came to be called as Durga Bhabhi. She stood out as one of the few women to appear in the machinations of the HSRA.

She is honoured for her part in aiding Bhagat Singh in escaping Lahore following the assassination of a British police officer J.P. Saunders. Durga Devi assumes the identity of Bhagat Singh's wife in a scenario that appears in cinematic depictions with her 3-year-old son, she deftly eludes the police. The early 1930s had seen women started taking part actively in politics. Women also lent their support to revolutionary organizations across India. Durga Devi Vohra, the widow of HSRA operative Bhagwati Charan was amongst the first women. Britishers noticed that women provided "unexpected assistance" during civil disobedience movement, in the case of the HSRA, reservations about the roles of women in the inner party circle existed, with women such as Durga 'Bhabhi' and Sushila 'Didi' being absorbed into the familial party structure.

GENDERED AGENDAS IN HSRA

It was true that HSRA had policy that an 'ideal revolutionary' could be male only. A policy also exists that party's male members, particularly 'inner circle' who could be called upon any time to make the 'ultimate sacrifice, to remain unmarried and therefore celibate. For instance, Bhagat Singh left Lahore when his parents started arranging for his marriage, as he did not want to leave behind a young widow. Chandrashekar Azad along with Bhagat Singh had clear notion of restricting women to be a part of the revolutionary movement. They felt their participation could weaken the ideal goal of the party and they were double unsafe while working within the secret organisation (*HSRA*). Most of the members at HSRA studied at DAV College, Lahore, and the concept of brahmacharya highly motivated them to have an explicit sense of self-control not only from marriage and women but also from familial relationships. According to Azad and Bhagat Singh's ideological experiences, family and connections were something that could weaken a revolutionary. Later, reviewing the excellent work that Bhagwati Charan's wife, Durga Bhabhi, and Susheela ji of Delhi had done, girls began to be taken into the revolutionary party.¹



Figure 2. The Vohra Family: Bhagwati Charan, Durga Devi, and Sachi Nanda. c.1928

Source: Image courtesy of National Archives of India ²

¹ Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India: Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1998, p. 121.

²Comrade Ram Chandra photograph collection, S. No. 190, 11

Through her husband, Bhagwati Charan Vohra (the son of a wealthy Gujarati), Durga Devi initially met the revolutionaries in Lahore. She bore him a son named Sachi Nanda. She was dedicated towards teaching and worked with women's institution. Her ideas about being a revolutionary started taking shape as she was drawn deeper into the HSRA. After attending some sessions of Kolkata (Calcutta) Congress, Durga Devi returned to Lahore with her son. Bhagwati Charan (learnt the process of making bombs) was included in the plan to attack legislative assembly. So, he invited Durga Devi to bid farewell to Bhagat Singh. Comrade Ram Chandra seen that during this time she put significant efforts to aid the families of revolutionaries in Lahore and acted as a 'post box' for revolutionaries in hiding. She took greater risks as she bought firearms from the North-western frontier province which she kept hidden under her clothes. Her husband Bhagwati Charan passed away on 28th May 1930, when a bomb was being tested before its utilisation, it exploded too soon. Durga Bhabhi now became a widow. According to Kumari Lajjawati she bore her widowhood with exceptional bravery and did not even shed a tear when she was told the news of her husband's death. She even sold her ornaments for Rs 3000 to help Bhagat Singh and others during their trial and would often visit them in jail. When Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were awarded death sentence, she pleaded Gandhi for their help. As a revenge for the three hangings, she even tried to assassinate British official lord Hailey (ex-governor of Punjab). He was also a staunch enemy of revolutionaries but was caught and imprisoned for three years. She even taken part in the last journey of Martyr Jatin Das from Lahore to Kolkata (Calcutta) after his death on the 63rd day of hunger strike in the Lahore Jail.

In one of her next interviews, she exclaimed:

*"I was not a born revolutionary, but one who becomes a revolutionary with the maturity of ideas."*³

THE LAMINGTON ROAD OUTRAGE

The declaration of independence was marked in the beginning of 1930 and in March, Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement of peaceful protest, where thousands of women protested, made salt and many of them were arrested after leaving their houses. Gandhi initially opposed women's participation as he believed they would 'complicate' matters, but later agreed to take them along. Consequently, 5000 women led a procession in Lahore. On the footsteps of these women revolutionaries, in October 1930 Durga Devi opened fire at a European couple who were waiting outside the police station in South Bombay. It was "the first" time a woman played a significant role in a 'terrorist outrage.' To commemorate the execution of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru that had been ordered the day before, Durga Devi, Prithvi Singh quickly planned the 'event' at Lamington Road. The action was technically carried out in violation of the party policy, which said that Azad was the only person who could give authorization for such actions. One thing which is clear from this incident that the gendered roles which Durga devi was assigned as a mother, wife and later as widow gave her a special disguise. This violent movement was earlier linked by the Department of Indian Political Intelligence to young bachelors as this was primarily the case of inner circle members, hence the strategic use of wives could give this these activities a more legitimate appearance. The idol front was women. In case of Durga Devi, her widowhood did not force her into lonely depression, in contrast she grew more vibrant. She continued to live with traditional expectations of a mother, wife, and widow to misdirect intelligence and police networks to avoid being captured. On 14th September 1932, she surrendered herself in Lahore. There is not much information in her testimony. Comrade Ram Chandra mentions that Durga Devi requested the police to

³ Vohra, OHT, 20-1)

arrest her by sending them a letter on which address was written. When she was brought to Lahore Jail she was imprisoned as a Satyagrahi, she did not remain talkative.

The women took revolutionary responsibilities in the 1930s can be understood as a sign that how oppressive the government had grown and that women were prepared to deviate from their traditionally assigned roles. As Chaman Lal reported that, “who would have imagined that those modest, pious goddesses of peace and sweetness will end up being real fighters for their nation?”. After independence, she started living as a common citizen in Ghaziabad. She went on to open a school for poor children in the Purana Qila area of Lucknow on 20th July 1940.⁴ In 1956 Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru also visited her school and laid foundation stone of the school known as the City Montessori School.⁵ She also donated her land for Shaheed Shodh Sansthan. She died on 15th October 1999 at the age of 92.⁶



Fig 3. Shaheed Samarak Swatantra Shodh Kendra, Shaheed Nagar, Purana Qila, Lucknow.

Source: TV Bharat .com

WOMEN IN NATIONALIST MOVEMENTS

The next few years of the 1940s saw the third vital campaign of M.K. Gandhi – The Individual *Satyagraha* and the Quit India Movement from 1940-1944. In these two movements, again several women from Punjab and other states took part and helped their male counterparts. For instance, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur was detained at Ambala Jail for about a month after being arrested in Kalka for leading processions. She was treated like a normal prisoner. Women were occasionally confined in solitary confinement as to put pressure on them to stop protesting. The health of female political prisoners was negatively affected by the poor food and inadequate medical care.

The Second World War began from 1939-1945 and it had a decisive impact on the political situation in India. By now, women were members, and some were even leaders of the students' associations, peasant movements, and labour unions. The presence of women in the various movements of the day was as significant as the anti-British movement. Throughout the war years as were their election to legislative seats and their appointment to positions of power and authority. To exemplify, women like Lado Rani Zutshi was the leader of the Students Association of Lahore, Begum Shah of Nawaz, and Lekhwati Jain too held crucial roles and responsibilities.

⁴ ETV Bharat Aug 8,2022

⁵ Major Kuldeep Singh, children of Midnight Durgawati Devi: The fearless lady, Youngbites.com

⁶ ABVP voice, twitter.com

CONCLUSION

A willingness to manipulate such suppositions ensured that activism by women such as Durga Devi Vohra was a valuable and indeed indispensable element of revolutionary operations. Moreover, it is evident that revolutionary organizations eventually conceded this, even as they were a product of a society where conservative views on women's roles were in a state of fluidity, as women and girls began to take up roles in the wider nationalist movement. The revolutionaries found out that resisting gender conventions was an effective means of functioning below the detector of the corrective apparatus of the state, and extended these opportunities to women who wanted them. These women simultaneously defied and appropriated norms and ideals around contemporary concepts of womanhood and it was precisely this, that made them such useful operatives. Several women supported their revolutionary husbands, not simply by keeping their homes, but through illegal activities such as getting and hiding guns and ammunition. The extent to which women participated in the revolutionary movement, particularly in supportive roles (meaning, those who 'provided shelter, food, and cover, carried messages or arms or instilled a passion to "serve the country" among their children, telling them about the "heroes" and "martyrs" who had sacrificed their lives for the country's freedom') is ultimately immeasurable. An Unsung hero, Durga Bhabhi's sacrifice and bravery is still forgotten today.

"When the history of India's fight for independence comes to be written, the sacrifice made by the women of India will occupy the foremost place"

-Mahatma Gandhi

References

Weekly Report of the Director, Intelligence Bureau of the Home Department, Government of India, dated New Delhi, December 17, 1931, no. 48. British Library, IOR L/PJ/12/391). -National Archives of India (NAI) Home Political, 1928–1933 Private Papers Fortnightly Reports

Center for South Asian Studies Archive, Cambridge University Oral History Collection, available online at <http://www.s-asian.cam.ac.uk/audio.html>

Bandyopadhyay, Sandip. "Women in Bengal Revolutionary Movement (1902–35)." *Manushi* (Jul.–Aug. 1991): 30–35.

Freedom files: The secret life of Durga Devi Vohra (scroll. in) -PressReader.com - Digital Newspaper & Magazine Subscriptions <https://fb.watch/k6qwUvjGuR/?mibextid=5zvaxg>

Kaur Daljit. "Role of Punjab's Women in the Indian freedom struggle"

International Journal of All Research Education and Scientific Methods (IJARESM), ISSN: 2455-6211
Volume 9, Issue 12, December-2021.