



Short Review Paper

The Queens of Bengal who wrote their own History

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Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 5th July 2023, revised 18th August 2023, accepted 9th September 2023

Abstract

Till today, women are showed as weaker sex. In medieval age the condition of women in India was miserable. Generally they were thought to be confined in cooking and serving male members of the house. But there were some queens in Bengal in the medieval period. They by their activities proved that women are not of weaker sex. In this article, I will be telling about two queens of Bengal who are Rani Bhabasankari and Rani Chandraprabha respectively. Rani Bhabasankari took the charge of her husband's kingdom in the time of its distress and led the kingdom successful with repulsing Afghan attacks. In another side Rani Chandraprabha did not dare to kill her husband, whose role was against the people of the kingdom and common people had been requesting the queen Chandraprabha to save them from the torture of the state.

Keywords: Bengal, Bhurshut, Rani Bhabasankari, Bishnupur, Rani Chandraprabha, Malla kingdom, Afghans, Lalbai, Queens.

Introduction

The history of Bengal is very old. From lower Paleolithic age, we find existence of human beings in Bengal. With span of time, many kingdoms rose and fell in Bengal. Many kings became famous for their deeds. There were also some woman rulers who in spite of the restriction of the society led their kingdom successfully. But their activities have not been discussed elaborately. Rani Bhabasankari of the Bhurshut kingdom and Rani Chandraprabha were two most important queens of Bengal in medieval period. I will be trying to focus on their lives and activities, breaking the narrow boundary of the society.

Materials and Methods

The paper is based on analytical research methodology. I have used mainly secondary sources like district gazetteers, books etc. to write my article. At last I am trying to come into a critical conclusion.

Discussion

Rani Bhabasankari: The old Bhurshut kingdom included a large part of present Hooghly and Howrah district of West Bengal. Chaturanan, a Brahmin was the founder of the dynasty. Shibnarayan was one of the descendants of Chaturanan who had a son named Rudranarayan. Rudranarayan married Bhabasankari¹. Rani Bhabasankari was the daughter of Dinanath Choudhury who was a feudal king under the Bhurisheshttra kingdom of Bengal. His father taught her how to ride on horse, how to use sword and other arms. She also sometimes went to

the battlefield with her father. She also took lessons of warfare, politics, sociology and history.

When she was young, she went to hunt in jungles on the bank of Damodar river. One day when she was running behind a deer, a group of wild buffalos attacked her. She herself defended herself from the attack. Rudranarayan, the king of the Bhurshut kingdom saw the incident and became taken aback to see the skills of Bhabasankari. He fell in love with the young maiden and sent a proposal to Dinanath Choudhury of marriage between the king and his daughter².

Bhabasankari had a wish from her childhood that the person who could defeat her in battle would be her suitor. But as it was not possible for Rudranarayan as it would be disrespectful to him to join in a dual with a common folk. Then Bhabasankari proposed that both of them would cut a buffalo near Devi Rajballavi, the tutelary deity of Bhurisheshttra kingdom. But they would get only one chance to cut the buffalo. Both of them got succeed. Rudranarayan married Bhabasankari.

After her marriage, she helped her husband to rule the kingdom efficiently. She regularly visited the garrisons of the soldiers of the Bhurisheshttra kingdom. She arranged for her soldiers to learn modern system of warfare. She for first time appointed women in the army of Bhurisheshttra kingdom. She also declared that from every family of the kingdom there should be at least one who would know the military skills. She made it obligatory. Through this system, she hoped there would be no deficiency of soldiers in the time of emergency.

She also built a navy for Bhurisheshtra kingdom which becomes very powerful. Now the kingdom extended over Howrah, Hooghly and a large part of East Burdwan and East Mednipur and West Mednipur district. In that time Bhurisheshtra had progress in its agriculture and industry.

When Rudranarayan ascended on the throne, there was a political change in Bengal. Suleiman Karrani, the Afghan chief of the Bengal. He kept friendly relation with the Mogul court but his successor Dayud Khan declared his independence from the mogul court. Then Mogul emperor Akbar took it as a challenge and a new long course battle ensued in Bengal between Moguls and Afghans. Both parties tried to take the independent kings of Bengal in their sides. In this time most important two independent kingdoms are the Malla kingdom of Bishnupur and the Bhurshut kingdom. Both kingdoms took the side of Moguls and became the enemies of Afghans.

But the king suddenly passed away. As the prince Pratapnarayan was a child then, the queen had to rule the kingdom as the guardian of the young prince. In that time, Bengal was again and again penetrated by the conflicts between Moguls and Pathans. Though at this moment, Suleiman Karrani, the Afghan ruler of Bihar, was died, Usman Khan, a general of him became the new leader of rebellious Afghans. As there are some independent kingdoms in Bengal in that time, Moguls and Pathans both the parties wanted an oral submission or sometimes fully submission from these independent or semi-independent kingdoms. Bhurshut was one of these kingdoms which generally helped Moguls in battle against the Pathans. As Bhurshut helped the Moguls, Usman Khan also sought submission of the kingdom to him. But the queen Bhabasankari turned down his proposal. Being angry, Usman Khan tried to seize the kingdom by hooks and crooks.

In that time, GarhBhabanipur, near Pandua was the capital of Bhurshut kingdom³. One day the queen went to a temple of Goddess Kali, fourteen miles away from the capital. Suddenly Usman, the Pathan leader attacked on the queen. But the queen with her women guards defeated them.

Now, Usman became strict to capture the kingdom. He made a conspiracy with the general Chaturbhuj Chakraborty of Bhurshut kingdom and a group of Pathan soldiers in disguise of Hindu sannyasis, entered into the kingdom. But the queen got the news and immediately found the Pathans and killed them in a pitched battle⁴. Now she made her army ready and a battle was taken place in Kastangarh between the queen and Usman. Usman and his armies were totally defeated.

Now the queen was aware of the treachery of Chaturbhuj Chakraborty but she could not give him punishment as there was no definite proof to prove the treachery of Chaturbhuj. But she dismissed him from the generalship as he was failed to defend the kingdom against Pathans. She appointed raja Bhupati Krishna Roy of Pero fort as the new general.

But now Pathans more united with an army of over five hundred soldiers attacked the kingdom. As they were defeated in the battle of Kastangarh, no one in the kingdom considered that they could attack the kingdom again so quickly. When Pathans trenched in Khanakul of the kingdom, a hunter saw them and immediately gave the news to Bhupati Krishna Roy. Though Chaturbhuj did not accept the news as true, Bhupati Krishna Roy immediately sent the news to the queen.

In that time the queen was in the Bhavani temple of Banshuri village as the coronation program of her would be held there. The village was far away from the capital and Bhupati knew the Pathan invaders were in better position to attack on the queen. In spite of this, Bhupati arranged a strong army and started their journey to attack the Pathans from back.

The queen got the news after her coronation and immediately collected forces from Chaunpur, Banshingagarh, Naskardanga. She had her women guards also with her. She arranged 100 elephant troops, 500 cavalries and 500 infantries. She defended herself for hours till the main army under Bhupati came to her rescue. Now Pathans were in trap. They could not bear with the attacks from both front and back sides. The queen killed many Pathans in battle. Usman left the battle place broken hearted in the disguise of a fakir⁵.

When the news reached in the Mogul court, Mogul emperor Akbar honored the queen with the title "Raibaghini".

Chandraprabha: The Queen who did not dare to kill her husband for sake of her kingdom: Chandraprabha was the daughter of Sobha Singha, a powerful zamindar of Chetuabarda who with a Pathan leader Rahim Khan created an environment of fear all over Bengal⁶. In fact Mogul officials of Bengal also seemed to be weak to them. Though Aurangjeb sent his grandson Ajim-us-shan to repulse the rebellion, but he also failed. In this time, Raghunath Singha II came to help of the Mogul forces. After death of Sobha Singha in the hand of the princess of Burdwan, Raghunath suddenly attacked Chetuabarda. Rahim Khan and Himmat Singha, the brother of Sobha Singha being defeated fled away⁷. The king took Chandraprabha, the daughter of late Sobha Singha to Bishnupur, the capital of the Mallabhum and married her. It is said that it was Chandraprabha herself who asked Raghunath for his help to secure her safety by a letter after death of his father.

Here is a folktale that when Raghunath was the prince of Bishnupur, once he was sent to repulse the attack of Portuguese looters on the pilgrims. Here he saw Chandraprabha first time in a group of pilgrims where she fought bravely against Portuguese to save her group⁸. Raghunath came to her help and they jointly defeated the Portuguese attack. From there both the prince and the princess fell in love to each other. From the folktale, it is also noticed that Chandraprabha was also expert in warfare.

With taking Chandraprabha with him, the king also took Lalbai, a professional dancer, with him to Bishnupur. The king, patron

of music, became attracted to Lalbai and Lalbai turned out to be an evil to the kingdom. She tried to take chances of the king's affection to her and tried to take the power of the Malla kingdom in her own hand. As she knew that it was hardly possible for her, a single Muslim woman to get the power of a kingdom where most of the inhabitants were Hindus, she slowly tried to convert some people of Bishnupur in Islam and tried to recruit Muslim soldiers in the Malla army. This made the people of Bishnupur angry on their king whom they believed gave the power to Lalbai. Lalbai with taking chance of weakness of Raghunath to music and beauty became close to Raghunath and gave birth of a son which made the people of Bishnupur anxious of their future. Because Raghunath had no other son so, the son of Lalbai would be the legitimate heir of him. But they had already seen how Lalbai had tried to convert them in Islam and could not rely upon this son. In fact, Lalbai made the condition too difficult to handle by declaring to come all citizens of Bishnupur in the ceremony of putting rice to her son's mouth for first time. Here she tried to force some citizens to eat the meat of cows which angered the citizen against the king and Lalbai⁹. They went to queen Chandraprabha to take some immediate action to save the kingdom from forcefully conversion of the kingdom into Islam which would make a revolt by people of the kingdom against the Malla royal family¹⁰. Chandraprabha, at first tried to make her husband aware of Lalbai's evil designs to capture the power of the Malla kingdom in her own hand, but the king did not hear to her words and in fact sometimes helped Lalbai in her work. The condition of the kingdom became totally ripe for a revolt in any time.

Chandraprabha understood that to curb the power of Lalbai, at first she had to separate the king Raghunath from her. Chandraprabha planned to prison the king and make his brother Gopal Singha as the next Malla king. But when she was entering the room of Raghunath Singha II with a group of armed soldiers, the king saw them. He might think that they came to kill him. Him jumped through the wall and made suicide. In another tradition, it is said that the queen shot an arrow to Raghunath Singha II when he was trying to kill his brother Gopal Singha in his own hand. The king immediately fell on the ground and died. Chandraprabha elected Gopal Singha, the brother of late Raghunath Singha II as the next king of the Malla kingdom¹¹. Then she decided to be the "sati" with his late husband in same funeral. In one side, she coming out of household obeyed her duty to save the people of her kingdom, in another side, becoming the sati with her late husband; she showed her love for her husband.

Conclusion

At last it can be concluded that though the condition when they took charge of their kingdoms were different, but their roles

were almost same. They appeared as the saviour of the kingdoms. They did not only prove that women are equal to the men, but their lives can make many women inspire to write their own history. Most interestingly Rani Bhabasankari appeared at the political scenario of Bengal when the Afghans were trying to regain their lost power in Bengal. In another side Rani Chandraprabha came in the scenario when an Afghan uprising was just repulsed. In fact her father was also a leader of the uprising. Both queens fought against the enemies of inside and outside. Rani Chandraprabha had a tragic death but the traditional concept that to a Hindu wife, her husband seems to her god was broken down by her and she proved that a husband and a wife both are equal in a family and both have equal rights and equal duties¹². To a king, his whole kingdom is his family, but the Malla king Raghunath Singha II became failure to fulfil his duties to his people which was fulfilled by the Queen Chandraprabha and proved herself as an adept ruler. They are not only pride of Bengal, but also pride of India.

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