



Patriarchy and Empowerment in Nandini Sengupta's *The Forgotten Life of a Warrior Queen: Rani Durgawati*

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ABSTRACT

The role of women plays a crucial role in the development of a country. Women, especially in India carry dual responsibilities that constitute both her home and outside world. A woman plays various roles such as a daughter, mother, wife, labourer and as a leader. The text, *The Forgotten Life of a Warrior Queen* portrays the life of the brave Queen, Rani Durgawati who protested against the patriarchal society and rose above all, as a woman full of vigour, valour, power and independence. Gond tribes do not allow women to inherit propriety, manage political affairs and perform religious ceremonies. However, Rani Durgawati broke free from all these restrictions and established herself as a powerful queen. She was not just a great warrior but was also a symbol of hope for women. The aim of this paper is to bring out the qualities that a woman requires to fight against the patriarchal society and her role in the up-liftment of the society through the text, *The Forgotten Life of a Warrior Queen* by Nandhini Sengupta.



Nandini Sengupta is a popular journalist and an author of historical fiction. She had always been fascinated by India's glory in the past which made her write books on historical events. Her popular works include *The Blue Horse And Other Amazing Animals from Indian History* (2020), *The Poisoned Heart and The Ocean's Ocean* (2019). In her book, *The Forgotten Life of a Warrior Queen*, she narrates the life of Rani Durgawati. It was her first narrative non-fiction biography. The story is about the Gond tribe, who falls in love with a Rajput woman and their struggle against the Mughals.

Tribes are a group of people who live in the deep forests generally as large communities. They are generally occupied with farming and other agricultural activities. In India, the tribes form an important section of population because of two important factors which is denoted by Frederic Engels as, "They constitute 8.14 percent of the total population and the second, they have distinct cultures, dialects and economic pursuits in different ecological setting" (5). Lucy Mair defines tribe as, "an independent political division of a population with a common culture" (5). The tribes of eastern India are less explored and alienated whereas the tribes of western India have gained recognition due to political and cultural changes. The Gond tribe which is considered to be one of the largest and ancient tribes in India has gained popularity in the Medieval India. They are spread across the southern slopes of Satpura plateau, Godavari valley and Nagpur plains. These regions historically came to be called as Gondwana. During the ancient times, they lived a pastoral life but after the ascension of Mughals, they transformed themselves into a ruling class tribal community.

The term 'Gond' is derived from Telugu language which refers to people from the hills. The Gond tribes are divided into different groups namely, The Kutia Gond (weaker section of the tribes, The Dongria Tribe (less skilled people) and The Desia Gond (live in plains for cultivation). Forsyth called the Gondwana locals as, "naked or clothed in leaves, living in trees and practicing cannibalism" (16). Their staple food includes millets such as kodo and kutki, and they are fond of salap palm juice. Drinking liquor is a part of their life style irrespective of age. The Desai Gond produces cash crops such as mustard, blackgram and turmeric. They use buffaloes for ploughing the field. The Barter system is the common form of exchange. As Dash states, "The Medieval period witnessed growth of Gonds and Rajputs in central India who flourished as martial races and occupied position of warriors in caste hierarchy. The Mughal and the other rulers used to patronize warrior caste and employed their cheftains in high positions in civil and military administration" (6). The land has been continuously ruled by India's most luminous kings from the Mauryas and Guptas to Candela's before it was taken over by Mughals. The Gond community was classified into various sections known as garhs. Each garh was



further divided into twelve villages and every village had an headman. the events and incidents associated with this tribal community is depicted in the novel, *The Forgotten Life of A Warrior Queen*.

The text centers on the character, Queen Rani Durgawati. She was the daughter Chandela Rajput King Shalivahan who ruled the Mahoba kingdom. She lost her mother at a young age and was raised by her father. She spent her time learning archery in the forests with other boys and became an excellent hunter and an archer. She had the spark from her ancestor, Vidyadhar, a popular Indian ruler who defeated Mohammed Ghazni, nearly four hundred years ago. His power, valour and virtue is reflected in the life of the Queen. She explored arts that were reserved only for men. She was well educated when compared to the other women in the community. She was a democratic leader and had strategic thinking. She had such a domination over decision making like men. She challenged several social norms and out broke the men around her.

Durgawati met Dalpat Shah, the son of Sangram Shah in the Mania Devi temple in Mahoba. She fell in love with him and decided to marry him inspite of the fact that she was a Rajput and he was from Gond tribal community. Her father, Shalivahan wanted her to choose a groom only from the Rajput community, but she rejected as he was not ready to give up her love for the sake of anybody. When the Guru questioned Durgawati if she is willing to marry a Gond, she replied, "He might be a Gond by birth, but his deeds make him a Kshatriya"(34). The Gonds practice clan exonymy that is, a woman should get married to a man of her clan only so that the heir remains unchanged. Anybody who does not obey will be sent out of the community and it is also believed that god will punish them with diseases like leprosy or other skin diseases. In the swayamvar, Dalpat Shah challenged all the other kings and wooed the heart of the queen. He rode away with Rani Durgawati back to his kingdom. The Gonds greeted the newly wed couple with full of love and happiness. This was the first step undertaken by the bold lady, Durgawati to rise against the patriarchal norms and to establish herself in a new phase of life. Though Rajputs were against the decision of her marriage to the Gond tribe, Durgawati stood strong in her decision. This initiated Durgawati's position as a strong Queen. When she touched her father-in-law feet for blessings, he gifted her with a piece of land. Thus, she became the first woman who to own a property.

In Gond tribe, it was compulsory for a woman to bear a male child to carry the ancestral heritage and glory. Rani Durgawati gave birth to a son, Vir Narayan. Within six months of the birth of the child, Dalpat Shah died due to ailment and Rani Durgawati had to ascend the throne. She also had to look after



her son as she was a single parent. Rivalry arose between the queen and Durgawati's brother -in-law, Chandra Shah, as he wanted to ascend the throne after the death of his brother. In anger, he left the kingdom and surrendered himself to Karna Shah, the King of the Gond Kingdom of Chanda. Only men were allowed to manage the political affairs of the kingdom and her actions proved a new beginning for the Gond community. Rani Durgawati was the first queen to ascend the throne in the history of the Gond Kingdom and was an inspiration of empowerment for all the other women in and around the kingdom. As Agarwal states, "Here comes the queen Durgawati / Here comes Mother Durga / She is ready for a battle with a sword in hand and she is called Rani Durga / She is Raja Dalpat's queen and she's like Ran Chandi, an incarnation of Goddess Durga / She is everywhere and she protects GarhaMandla" (72).

During her reign, she gave importance for religious beliefs and built many temples in and around the territory. There were minute inscriptions on the temple pillars about the story of the Gond community that were erected during her rule. In the Gond community, the temple rituals should be performed only by men but Durgawati attended temple festivals and offered prayers with religious charm. She was also a generous lady who gave away elephants and gold coins to the people of smaller kingdoms.

During Rani Durgawati's initial years of ruling, the queen faced a lot of troubles as she was new to the political world. She took over the responsibilities of the Gond Kingdom at the age of twenty six along with her son, who was just six months old. She was the queen of the kingdom of Garha Mandla. At first, she appointed all noble men as the ministers of the kingdom according to various ranks. She taught archery and other fighting arts to men. Two administrators, AdharKayastha and Man Thakur helped the queen to manage the political affairs of the kingdom. The first war as a queen was with Baaz Bahadur, the ruler of Malwa in 1556 A.D. Her exclusive ideas brought her victory. The battle with Sujat Khan brought innumerable amount of wealth for her kingdom after the victory. In the Battle of Damoh, she showed great military prowess and strategies which led to another prosperous victory for the Queen. During the war, she would ride an elephant called Sarman, her favorite elephant as it once saved her from a tiger when she went for hunting. Sengupta posists, "Lion-hearted yet level-headed, spirited and shrewd, as courageous as she was compassionate, Gond Rani Veerangana Durgawati would be an extraordinary woman in any age" (3). Later, she changed the capital from Singorgarh to Chauragarh. She realized that Chauragarh is the best place to fight as it was a terrain land. These exceptional ideas made the queen even more popular across the country including the king of the Mughal Empire, Akbar.



During Rani Durgawati's reign, she managed her kingdom very well. She was a wise leader with intellectual commitment. She possessed all the necessary qualities required for leadership. At first, she provided opportunities for women to earn. She converted a part of the forest land into agricultural lands so that she can allow women to cultivate cash crops. Through this method, she established a strong economy. She brought several land reforms to remove inequality. She also built dams for irrigation. During her reign, people used gold coins for tax payment. She also waved off taxes during drought and famine. The fodder for elephants and other royal animals was paid from the treasury. When the treasury funds were declining, she decided to export cotton and other cash crops to Gujarat and other neighboring states to improve the economy of the kingdom. Thus, it led to establishment of a firm territory that acted as a spark for Akbar's intention to meet Durgawati.

Akbar sent two scholars, to meet the Queen. The scholars returned to Akbar with huge praise of her beauty, valour and intelligence. He rose in fury to meet her. Akbar felt that it would be a disgrace for him if he goes to meet the Queen and so he decided to send another King in order to capture the Queen alive and bring her to his kingdom. Akbar sent Asaf Khan to wage a war against her. They thought her to be an easy prey as she was a woman and also a widow. Asaf Khan arrived with a whole troupe of soldiers in Naarai. As Fitz Edward Halls states, "As queen regnant, her husband having demised, she ventured on a foray against Bhelsa. In reprisal for this incursion, Asaf Khan was sent, by the Emperor Akbar, to chastise her childhood" (14). Her marriage brought the Rajputs and the Gond dynasty against the Mughals. The battle of Naarai took place in a hilly region which was covered by two rivers, Gaur and Narmada on either sides. On the first day of the war, the queen and her troops fought fiercely against Asaf Khan and his soldiers. At night, Durgawati realized that she does not have guns to fight against the Mughals and decided to kill the King at midnight. However her subjects did not agree to this idea because it was wrong and they were also afraid to fight in the dark. On the second day, Durgawati and her troops began to fight against the Mughals. Due to the attack with the guns, her soldiers began to die rapidly. She escaped through the forests to collect a larger army. However, her plans failed. She was attacked by an arrow and she became unconscious. After sometime, when she recollected her consciousness, she realized that Asaf Khan's plan was to catch her alive. As Sengupta states, "Being a strong woman ultimately sealed this queen's fate" (98). This was against her belief as Akbar treated her as an object of lust and greed. To escape from Akbar she stabbed herself.



Conclusion:

In the text, *The Forgotten Life of a Warrior Queen*, Nandhini Sengupta portrays the characteristics of a bold lady who fights against the patriarchal society and becomes one of the most recognized Queens of India. She has been an inspiration for women.

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