



VOICE OF THE SILENT INCARCERATION: NANIBALA DEVI

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

“We will die, the nation will rise; we will sacrifice our lives so the nation will get freedom” – these were words neither of an anarchist nor of a terrorist, but the expression of *tyaktena bhuñjīthā* (enjoy through renunciation). This was the principle that guided Indian revolutionaries in their struggle for independence. Among these revolutionaries, Nanibala Devi stands as a burning example. She fought not only for India’s freedom but also for women’s liberation against the constraints of her time. Nanibala Devi as a first woman state prisoner in colonial India under the Regulation III of 1818 experienced countless brutal cruelties from the British police. In Kashi Jail, she endured demonic torture of chilli paste being enforced into her vagina, yet never revealed single information about the revolutionaries. She was also kept in an underground punishment cell without ventilation system. In Presidency Jail, she was kept as state prisoner. This paper explores the life struggle and sacrifices of Nanibala Devi to the cause of India’s freedom. Through the exploration of prison life of Nanibala, this paper also highlights the treatment of prisoners, especially women prisoners during the early phase of colonial rule.

Keywords: *Nanibala Devi, revolutionary, Regulation III of 1818, Kashi Jail, Presidency Jail, Prison*

Introduction

In order to divert the public opinion, the British dubbed the revolutionary movement variously as ‘anarchism’ and ‘terrorism’. Yet those who understood the ideals and its true purposes and guided others onto this path used to say – ‘we will die, the nation will rise, we will sacrifice our life and the nation will get freedom.’¹ Such words represent neither the voice of an anarchist nor of a terrorist – they expressed the spirit of *tyaktenabhuñjīthā* – enjoy through renunciation.²

The word “Independent India” no longer brings new excitement, but there was a time when the very soul of the nation was filled with silent determination to sacrifice everything for its attainment. The foundation of Independent India rests on countless hangings, exiles, imprisonment, tortures, and loss of life in front of bullet – built by numerous unsung and unheard fighters. Among all these fighters women had a glorious past in this action.³ In Bengal, revolutionary women played a crucial role in the early phase of the movement, often without joining in direct operation. In addition to their household chores, they served as vital link of communication between revolutionaries including carrying messages from one revolutionary to another, conveying party instructions, concealing and delivering weapons, and providing shelter to the revolutionaries as homemaker.⁴ Their courage and actions paved the way for future generations of women to join for nation’s freedom and defied the oppression of the British rule.

One such female fighter was Nanibala Devi, the first woman state prisoner under Regulation III of 1818.⁵ At a time when eating one raw chilli can cause unbearable pain for many, she endured inhuman cruelty: stripped naked, raw chilli paste inserted into her vagina and kneaded over the body, even then the British police failed to procure a single secret information from her.⁶ Such kind of countless demonic and inhuman tortures were endured by Nanibala Devi (1888-1967), all in the cause of India’s freedom.⁷

At the outset it is important to remember that despite a first women state prisoner, Nanibala Devi remained almost absent from the mainstream pages of history. The information about her life, struggle and contribution to the cause of India’s freedom are rare, except one account written by Kamala Dasgupta in vernacular Bengali under the title of *Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari (Women of Bengal in the Freedom Struggle)* where few pages are devoted to Nanibala. All the subsequent study on Nanibala Devi is based on the information provided by Dasgupta. Dasgupta’s also contributed a small of writing in English on Nanibala in the *Dictionary of National Biography* which itself is based on her previous book.⁸ This paper is based on the writings of Kamala Das Gupta, along with few scattered writing appeared in the newspapers and secondary works.

Early Life of Nanibala

Nanibala Devi, the daughter of Surya Kanta Banerjee and Giribala Devi was born in 1888, at Bally in Howrah district. In accordance with the customs of the time, she was married in 1899 merely at the age of eleven.⁹ Barely five years later, in 1904 she lost her husband before she could understand what married life was all about and was forced to leave her in-laws house.

Since childhood she had deep interest in education. After returning to her parental home, she wanted to continue her studies, but the conservative natal house became a barrier to follow her dream. In those days, a woman returning from her in-law's house believed to bring a lot of trouble. Moreover, Nanibala had an astute personality which further strained her relationship with her natal family.¹⁰ She realised that it was meaningless to remain in a place devoid of love and respect. Resolving to start a fresh life, Nanibala leaves her ancestral home and took shelter in a Christian missionary in Ariyadaha town and acquired knowledge of English.¹¹

Initiation of the Revolutionary Journey

Nanibala stepped into the path of revolution at a time when armed revolutionaries swore to liberate the country and did not even hesitate to give their lives in the struggle for freedom. Secret revolutionary societies were gradually emerging. Young men and women are joining to the revolutionary societies in droves to wrest the country during the Swadeshi Movement.¹² Amarendranath Chatterjee a revolutionary and a member of Jugantar party, was the nephew of Nanibala in distant relationship. Chatterjee introduced her with the rising tide of revolutionary ideas and a new chapter began in her life.¹³

Nanibala in Disguise

In August 1915, after receiving information about the Indo-German conspiracy, the police raided *Sramajibi Samabay*, an organization based in Calcutta. During this incident Amar Chatterjee absconded but Ramchandra Majumdar was arrested and sentenced as state prisoner under Regulation III of 1818. At the time of his arrest Ramchandra was unable to give the information where he had hidden a Mauser pistol. It was then that the widowed Nanibala Devi disguised herself as Ramchandra Majumdar's wife, wore *shankha* and *sindoor* and went to Presidency jail. There, she managed to gather secret information about Mauser pistol. In those days, no one could have imagined that a Bengali widow dressed as another man's wife, enter into prison and evade the sharp eyes of the police to accomplish such work – something extraordinary and courageous works neither an ordinary girl, nor even a police officer could managed with such skill as Nanibala had shown.¹⁴ Within a few months, the police discovered that Nanibala Devi was not Ramchandra's wife, but they remained unaware that earlier she gave the shelter to Ramchandra Majumdar at Rishra.¹⁵

In September 1915, a house was rented again in Chandernagar. Just like Rishra, securing a house was almost impossible without having a woman as homemaker. Once again, Nanibala Devi appeared in a guise of a housewife. At that time her home became a shelter for the fugitive revolutionaries such as Jadugopal Mukherjee, Amar Chatterjee, Atul Ghosh, Nalinikanta Kar, Binaybhushan Dutta and Bijay Chakravarty.¹⁶ However, soon Nanibala's activity drew police attention. Following a subsequent raid in several houses in Chandernagar, and the sudden flight of the several revolutionaries, Nanibala's stay no longer remain safe.¹⁷ Therefore she leaved the residence. The British police launched an active search for her arrest. When police failed to trace her, they detained her father Suryakanta Banerjee and took to Elysium Row and interrogated him from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.¹⁸

A Valorous Escape

Nanibala Devi left her residence at Chandernagar and disappeared as soon as she received news of the police raid. An arrest warrant was issued to her name.¹⁹ At that time, elder brother of her childhood friend named Prabodh Mitra was going to Peshawar for work. After much pleading, her friend persuaded his elder brother to take Nanibala with him. Thus, she started her journey with Prabodh Mitra towards Peshawar via Benaras.²⁰ It was unthinkable then for a woman to travel thousands of kilometers with a stranger man. Indeed incredible courage was shown by Nanibala Devi at that time.²¹ About 16-17 days later, when the police got information of her whereabouts and went to Peshawar to arrest Nanibala. As she had been suffering with cholera for three days, she had been taken into custody. Her physical condition was so serious that she was taken to the police lock-up on stretcher in 1917.²² After recovery from Cholera, she was transferred to Kashi Jail.²³

Inhuman Torture in Kashi Jail

In Kashi jail, Deputy Police Superintendent Jiten Banerjee used to bring Nanibala Devi to the jail gate office for interrogation every day. She used to deny everything by saying that she knew no one and nothing. As a result, Jiten Banerjee started using slang languages but she remained silent. One day, two wardresses took her to a separate cell, where they forcibly threw her to the ground, stripped her naked and inserted some chilli paste into her vagina. She was screaming in pain and started kicking to the wardresses until they stopped their cruel treatment. Once again, Nanibala was brought to Jiten Banerjee for interrogation, but she refused to disclose anything about her companions or revolutionaries. She was given the threat of severe punishment but remains fearless and unwavering.²⁴

Kashi jail had an underground punishment cell consisted of a single door without any light or ventilation system. Nanibala was kept three consecutive days in this underground punishment cell. In Jiten Banerjee's order, she was kept in that cell for half an hour for first two days, when she was brought out of the cell, her condition was half dead. Despite all these demonic torture the police unable to procure any secret information from Nanibala Devi. On the third day she was kept in that underground

punishment cell for more than forty five minutes, when the door was opened Nanibala Devi was found fainted. At the end, the Kashi police realized that no confession could be obtained from her, therefore, gave up their efforts and send Nanibala Devi to Presidency jail, Calcutta.²⁵

Days in Presidency Jail

Nanibala Devi was convicted under Regulation III of 1818 in Presidency jail and was the first woman state prisoner under this act. When she was brought here, as a sign of protest against the brutal and violent torture she faced in Kashi jail, Nanibala refused to take food. The jail authorities including the District Magistrate failed to convince her for taking food. She was taken to the intelligence office every morning at 9 a.m., where she was interrogated by police superintendent Goldie. One day Goldie asked to Nanibala – you have to stay here, so what do we have to do to feed you?

Nanibala – Will you do whatever I ask?

Goldie – Yes!

Nanibala – Let me stay with Ramakrishna Paramhansa Dev's wife in Bagbazar, only then I will eat.

Goldie – Write an application about it.

Nanibala Devi immediately wrote an application. Goldie took the paper from her and tore it up into the dustbin without reading. She felt insulted and slapped hard on Goldie's face. Before the second slap, other police officers grabbed her hand. During this incident an infinite power was emanating from the inside of Nanibala Devi and her eyes were burning with anger. "If you tear it up, then why did you ask me to write an application? Don't the people of our country have any respect?" Nanibala Devi, the first woman state prisoner of Bengal threw all these questions to the police officer.²⁶

Rescue of Dukaribala Devi

One day, Nanibala Devi met with Dukaribala Devi in Presidency jail. She got to know from Dukaribala that, she had been sentenced for two years of imprisonment for finding seven Mauser pistol in her house at Siuri in Birbhum. She (Dukaribala) was kept in jail as a C class prisoner and due to rigorous imprisonment she had to grind half a maund of pulse every day. Nanibala made a plan for reducing her workload. On the 19th or 20th day of the fast, the Magistrate came again to request her for breaking the fast. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Nanibala Devi told to the Magistrate that she (Nanibala Devi) would only eat if a Brahman girl cooks for her. The Magistrate asked "is there any Brahman girl in this jail?" then Nanibala said that Dukaribala Devi is the Brahman woman. Thereafter, Dukaribala Devi was appointed as a cook for Nanibala Devi. This tremendously strong woman ate rice cooked by Dukaribala Devi on the 21st day of her fast. With her intelligence she saved Dukaribala Devi from bone-crushing hardwork.²⁷

Life after Release from Prison

After spending two years in Presidency jail, Nanibala Devi was finally released in 1919. But where would she go? Nanibala, who was sick and in poor health had nowhere to go. Family and relatives left her a long time ago. Still, knowing that she had nowhere to go, returned to her father's home. But she did not get shelter even from her parents. First, due to fear of the police; secondly, appearance of a married woman; thirdly, for living in the same house with the men; and fourthly, for travelling to Peshawar, Nanibala Devi has become almost unacceptable in her society at that time. The revolutionary organizations that she knew had also been destroyed by the British police, many of her co-revolutionaries were dead and some were in prison.²⁸ In this circumstance, Nanibala Devi's father rented a room in Calcutta, where she lived alone for many years in a great distress.²⁹

Out of wrath and grieves, she had ended all the relation with society and relatives. She lived in a kind of exile during the last phase of her life.³⁰ In this time she was suffering by tuberculosis and was cured by a monk. Nanibala was influenced by the monk and after initiation took saffron cloth. She was spending her life in extreme impoverishment. After independence, the Government of West Bengal granted a political pension for Nanibala Devi in 1950.³¹

Conclusion

The life and struggle of Nanibala Devi in the freedom movement remain largely unrecognized. This paper presents only a fraction of a vast canvas of her sacrifices. Nanibala Devi deeply immersed in the service of the nation, devoted herself to the cause of independence, endured inhuman and brutal torture at the hand of the British, lost family and relatives throughout her life, still not find mention in the pages of mainstream history textbook. In May 1967, two decades after India's independence she passed away quietly with great pride. As a revolutionary and a freedom fighter, Nanibala Devi was as firm as thunder but her heart was as soft, gentle and compassionate like that of a mother. Despite enduring countless tortures she remained steadfast. She was as patient as the earth.

Due to the absence of writings on Nanibala Devi, her lifelong struggles do not find a place in the pages of history. What is most disheartening is that, whatever information we have with us, we have failed to honour her sacrifice or grant her the recognition she truly deserved. A report published in a daily newspaper, *Anandabazar Patrika* on 18th May 2005 noted that the Bally Municipality, a town where Nanibala was born, had promised in 2001 to erect a statue in her memory. However, due to the petty political manoeuvring, the Municipal Authority failed to deliver their promise of commemorating Nanibala in her birthplace.³² This article is just a small attempt to make her exist in the mainstream of history.

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