

Dukari Bala Devi: A Forgotten Fiery Daughter of the Freedom Struggle in Bengal

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Abstract: Dukari Bala Devi was a forgotten yet fiercely brave woman revolutionary in the history of Bengal's freedom struggle, who became a living symbol of the anti-British movement. She was born in a humble peasant family in Birbhum district of West Bengal, where education and opportunities were limited, but the spirit of patriotism had been nurtured within her family. From her adolescence, she cherished the dream of freeing her motherland and dedicated her life to the movement by joining local revolutionary organizations. In that turbulent time of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's participation in public life was limited, yet Dukari Bala stood courageously beside the revolutionaries, taking part in risky activities such as secret message exchange, carrying arms, and giving shelter to activists. Many secret plans devised by her became key to the success of the revolutionary groups. The British police launched several operations to capture her, but she always managed to outsmart them with her intelligence and alertness. She never bowed before fear; inspired by patriotism, she encouraged other young women to join the movement. Her fearless spirit earned her the title of "Agni Kanya" (the Girl of Fire) from local people. After independence, names of women like Dukari Bala gradually faded from the mainstream of politics and history, even though their sacrifices strengthened the foundation of free India. Therefore, the life of Dukari Bala Devi represents not only the history of independence but also a shining example of the rise of womanhood.

Keywords: Dukari Bala Devi, freedom struggle, Birbhum, woman revolutionary, Agni Kanya.

The history of India's freedom struggle was long, complex, and multidimensional. In this struggle, not only men played leading roles, but women also, equally, sacrificing their lives, dreams, family, and even social prestige, devoted themselves to the national liberation fight. The freedom struggle was not only limited to political or military movements; it was connected with Bengal's folk songs, secret meetings of men and women in neighborhoods, purely patriotism-inspired socio-cultural movements, and various types of sacrifices and offerings made silently and privately.¹ The sacrifices of both men and women were immense; just as Mahatma Gandhi, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Bhagat Singh, Chittaranjan Das, or Masterda Surya Sen earned a golden place in the history of independence, similarly, in the folds of the same history, countless women warriors' names—Matangini Hazra, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, Victoria Amma, Aruna Asaf Ali and others—are spread, whose life stories are equally important but almost forgotten. Sometimes they were armed revolutionaries, sometimes leaders of public movements, sometimes secret messengers or shelter providers to comrades. These women broke societal chains, where women's place was limited to family and domestic spheres in the society; they overcame numerous obstacles to enter the field of

struggle politics at home and abroad. They ignored social norms, family ties, and the walls of feudal mentality in the oath to liberate the country. Their steps became pioneers not only in the context of the independence struggle but also in the overall women's liberation fight in Bengal and India. The neglected part of history, unfortunately, has not properly acknowledged women's contributions in the mainstream historiography after independence.² Just as men's names became widely respected and included in textbooks, women's names mostly remained forgotten. Many of them silently became prisoners, some sacrificed their lives, others disappeared into society's anonymous shadows after the movement ended.³ Yet, their sacrifice strengthened the foundation of independent India. The broad significance of the chapter of India's freedom struggle is incomplete without the unique courage and immense sacrifice of women. Their history is not only an indicator of the national liberation struggle but also a bright document of women's long-standing struggle in society. Recovering and bringing this neglected history to light is not only justice to them but also an unending source of inspiration for future generations.⁴

Dukari Bala Devi was born on 21 July 1887 in Jhoupada village under Nalhati Police Station in Birbhum district. Her father was Nilmoni Chattopadhyay and mother Kamalkamini Devi. The family was educated and socially conscious. From childhood, Dukaribala Devi was curious, brave, and determined. Her nephew Nibaran Ghatak was a well-known revolutionary, by whose contact Dukari Bala Devi was inspired in revolutionary spirit.⁵ Dukari Bala's childhood was spent in a rural environment where opportunities for women's education and independent thinking were limited at that time. The family had strong traditions of patriotism and humanitarian values. Her husband Fanibhushan Chakraborty was also socially conscious and silently supported his wife's patriotism and revolutionary activities. Dukari Bala Devi was curious and brave since childhood. Detailed information about her education is not available, but it is known that she studied at the village school and grew up in a family environment with strong patriotism and humanitarian values.⁶

In late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal's rural society, women's educational opportunities were very limited. Some initiatives to spread women's education were taken under British rule, but they were mainly urban-centric. In rural areas like Birbhum, the literacy rate among women was very low. According to the 1911 census report, Birbhum had the lowest female literacy rate in Bengal.⁷ Dukari Bala Devi's education started at the village school, where her teacher was Harihar Dutta. Later, she studied about one and a half miles away at Sonarkundu Upper Primary School, where her teacher was Haripada Singh. Her education was not very long; at the age of eleven, a family decision married her to Fanibhushan Chakraborty. After marriage, due to some family property problem, she began living with her husband at her father's house. However, the main foundation of Dukari Bala's education was the family environment where patriotism, humanity, and social service spirit were intense.⁸ Through her nephew Nibaran Ghatak, she came into contact with revolutionary circles and started secretly reading revolutionary literature.⁹

On 30th Ashwin 1312 Bengali year, the Partition of Bengal marked a new chapter in Bengal's history, causing a great stir in villages as well as cities. At the time, Dukari Bala Devi's life also changed. That year, on Kojagari full moon day, her elder son Kanu was born. Her husband Fanibhushan Chakraborty worked in

the railway telegraph office in Asansol. On 2nd Kartik, he returned to work but fell seriously ill few weeks later and had to resign and come home. After his return, one day he saw Dukari Bala's box of imported clothes and decided to burn all 10-12 of the imported saris, except the Santipur sari. Dukari Bala Devi said about making quilts for her son of these clothes, and elder women of the family requested him as well, but he was firm in his decision. Finally, he made Dukari Bala take a vow, touching his feet, never to use imported things. Asked to whom would she take the vow, Dukari Bala said to her deity and vowed to keep it till death.¹⁰ Thus, the seed of the Swadeshi mottoes was planted in her life. Keeping this vow was not easy. She only used the Santipur saris she had and worried about new cloth. At that time, Swadeshi cloth was unavailable in villages. The day of her elder son's Annaprashan came, which was Good Friday and eight days holiday continued. During the holiday, Nibaran Ghatak came to Jhoupada. Dukari Bala's father brought a new dhoti for Nibaran, but Nibaran stepped back four steps refusing it, saying, "I do not wear imported cloth and will not wear." This gave Dukari Bala hope. In private, she asked about his cloth, and he told that Swadeshi cloth was made in Bangalakshmi Cotton Mill in Srirampur (Hooghly), though expensive. Since then, the family never used imported goods. Through Nibaran, Dukari Bala learned about various aspects of the Swadeshi movement and revolutionary activities and was inspired. Nibaran told her that to work for the country, one must be ready for jail, gallows, and family sacrifice. Dukari Bala with firm resolve proceeded on this path and dedicated herself to the country. Her dedication and sacrifice later established her as one of Bengal's foremost women revolutionaries.¹¹

"If you can give your life for the country, your mothers can too." That was the motto of Birbhum's Dukari Bala Devi.¹² After the 1905 Partition of Bengal, waves of nationalist movements spread throughout the country. Various nationalist groups were formed, such as Atmonnati Samiti, Jugantar Dal, Calcutta Anushilan Samiti, Hemchandra Ghosh's Mukti Sangha in Dhaka, East Bengal Anushilan Samiti, all pledged to end British imperialism through armed revolution. Dukari Bala Devi also joined the Swadeshi movement.¹³ In first week of January 1917, the Birbhum district intelligence office received reliable information for the first time about revolutionary activities. This was linked to the historic 26 August 1914 Rodda Company arms robbery, when revolutionaries seized 50 Mauser pistols and 46,000 cartridges, considered a landmark success in Bengal's revolutionary history. Police investigation led them to Jhoupada village under Nalhati police station in Birbhum. On 10 January 1917, police raided Dukari Bala Chakraborty's house, arresting her with pistols and cartridges. Seven Mauser pistols and about 1,200 cartridges were recovered. Her nephew Nibaran Ghatak was also arrested in the same case.¹⁴ During the trial, neighbor Suradhani Mollani testified as a witness. After the trial in the special tribunal at Suri, Dukari Bala was sentenced to two years (one year rigorous) and Nibaran to five years rigorous imprisonment. This incident changed Dukari Bala's personal life and marked a new chapter in Bengal's women's revolutionary movement history. The revolutionary involvement of Dukari Bala and Nibaran was rooted in an inspiring family and social background. Born in 1887, after her husband Fanibhushan fell ill and resigned, he made his wife vow never to use foreign clothes. Through this oath, she was initiated into Swadeshi ideals, planting patriotism and sacrifice in her heart. During this time, Nibaran became associated with Jugantar revolutionaries at Mohsin College in Hooghly and turned Masima Dukri Bala's house into a safe shelter. In the revolu-

tionary society, Dukari Bala was known as 'Masima'. Leaders hid there and parts of Rodda arms were secretly stored. For this courage and dedication, she became the first Bengali woman arrested and punished under the Arms Act, immortalized in history as such. Her life and struggle remain unique examples for Bengal women's society.¹⁵

On 8 January 1917, British police raided Dukari Bala's house on secret information of arms. During the search, seven Mauser pistols and large quantities of cartridges were recovered. Dukari Bala Devi was arrested. She held an infant in her arms at arrest but was not spared. Convicted under the Arms Act, she was sentenced to rigorous imprisonment.¹⁶ She was the first woman in British India punished under this law. During the trial, she did not admit guilt and said to court, "What I did, I did for the country. If I must give my life for independence, I am ready." In Presidency Jail, Kolkata, as a third-class prisoner, she had to do hard labor such as grinding 20 kg of lentils daily. She suffered physical and mental torture but remained firm in revolutionary spirit.¹⁷ While imprisoned, she wrote letters to family, "I am fine, do not worry, just look after the children, so they do not cry."¹⁸ Here she met revolutionary Nonibala Devi, who was inspired by Dukari Bala's courage and struggled for her release.¹⁹ Nonibala was on 20-day hunger strike; officials tried but failed to persuade her to end the fast. 'Finally, the jail authorities said, 'You will have to stay in jail. Tell us, what can make you break your fast?'

She said, 'Will it be according to my wish?'

'Yes, it will be.'

'Then I want a Brahmin girl to cook for me.'

'Is there any Brahmin girl here?'

'Yes, there is — Dukribala Devi.'

'Alright, that will be done.'

On the twenty-first day, she broke her fast. In the company of the extraordinary and strong-willed prisoner Nanibala Devi, the loneliness of her life in prison came to an end. On December 24, 1918, he was released from jail.²⁰

After release, Dukari Bala Devi engaged in social service, focusing on educating and empowering local women. She continued supporting revolutionaries, and her home remained a safe shelter.²¹ Inspired by her motto, "If you can give your life, so can your mothers," many women joined the freedom struggle.²² She worked to promote women's education, self-reliance through Swadeshi industries, handicrafts, and education. Her contributions remain memorable in Birbhum's history. Sadly, there is no memorial or official recognition in her name. Her descendants have appealed for governmental acknowledgement.²³ Dukari Bala Devi passed away on 28 April 1970. Over a century later, no visible memorial exists in her village. Her descendants desire a statue or monument so new generations know her sacrifice. Her death marked the end of a bright chapter in Birbhum and Bengal's revolutionary history. Her contributions to independent India have not been adequately acknowledged, which remains a sorrow for historians and freedom lovers.²⁴

Dukari Bala Devi's life story is not only of a woman's revolutionary struggle but also a moving record of India's liberation movement and women's awakening. Born to a common rural family in Birbhum, she set a rare example of courage, patriotism, and sacrifice, inspiring then and now. Defying social shackles, family ties, and colonial fears, she proved patriotism knows no gender. Despite British atroci-

ties, prison hardships, and social neglect, she never abandoned her ideals. Her historical importance is that she was among the women who broke privacy's veil, practiced Swadeshi spirit, and became comrades of revolutionaries. Even after independence, she selflessly engaged in social service but history has not given her due honor. Absence of memorials and official recognition is a major gap in national historiography. Her life reminds us that freedom is not just political liberation but the reconstruction of women's dignity, social equality, and human values. Studying her life today is not only history but a renewed call to recognize women's roles and self-reliance in society. Her sacrifice and fiery patriotism tell future generations that every brick of freedom was laid on the blood, sacrifice, and bravery of all patriots, men and women alike. Recovering the memory of this "Agni Kanya" (Fiery Daughter) from forgotten history must be our collective duty and a true expression of national respect.

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