

## **Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani: Contribution of a Forgotten Fighter for the people against the British– A Study in the perspective of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

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**Abstract:** *Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani was a woman Zamindar of Manthana, who raised the flag of rebellion against the British to protect the peasants of Bengal. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when India was mired in poverty, illiteracy, casteism and the peasantry was plagued by British administration and exploitation, she came forward to protect and nurture them. She along with Bhavani Pathak led the rebellion of Sannyas and Fakir. According to British writer, she was a 'female dacoit' and used to rob boats, but this money she distributed among her subjects. Contemporary British rulers, while admiring her beauty and intelligence, were awed by her dominance and activity over the forest and rivers of North Bengal.*

**Key-words:** *Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani, woman Zamindar, female dacoit, Sannyas and Fakir Rebellion, Rangpur Rebellion, benevolent work.*

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a name that evoked a shiver in the history of chivalry in Bengal was -- Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani, who is identified as Devi Chowdhurani, a character in Bankim Chandra's novel. As a woman Zamindar, who raised the flag of rebellion against the British to protect the peasants of Bengal. Evading the eyes of the British rulers, who ran from one end to another through the rivers and forest of Bengal. Her bravery, patriotism, benevolent work, especially her love for her subjects made her so popular that various folk-tales and folksongs were born about her. Several schools, college, roads, Railway station, temples are still standing in her name. Not only that she was a most intelligent and spirited woman Zamindar.<sup>1</sup> When British colonial rule was about to be established in Bengal, her advance thinking about British future plans and also her protest against British imperial-exploitation can be said to have given rise to patriotism and nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. She not only efficiently managed her Zamindari administration but made significant contributions in the socio-economic and cultural life of Bengal.

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the British power tried to subjugate the Indian people, when women education was beyond the reach of women, the rise of

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<sup>1</sup> Sengupta, Abhijit. 2022. Itihase Upekhhita Amarkahini : Fakir O Sannyas Bidroher Ananya Birgatha- Pratham Parba, Itihas Tathya O Tarka, <https://www.itihasadda.in/Sannyasi-rebellion-of-bengal/>

Devi Chowdhurani as a women power and her unequaled struggle against the British rulers is unknown to many of us. No details are available regarding his ideals, thoughts and activities in the contemporary period. Although it has some similarities with the Great author Bankim Chandra's Novel 'Devi Chowdhurani', the difference is more. Even today, the research work on this intelligent, noble and daring woman is hardly seen. An attempt has been made to write the present study from this perspective.

Reconstructing the history of Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani is difficult but not impossible. The several correspondence letters of the British rulers in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers Rangpur contain several information about Devi Chowdhurani. Moreover, Panchanan Sarkar, the editor of the 'Pakkhik' magazine of Rangpur Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, compiled the 'Jago' songs of the Greater Rangpur region in the second issue of this magazine, which mentions the bravery of Devi Chowdhurani. The Collector of these 'Jago' songs was Pandit Yadveswar Tarkaratna (1850-1924 EC). Also, the brilliance and rebellion mentality of Jaydurga Devi Chowdhurani known from the 'Jaager gaan'(folksong) of balladist Ratiram Das, a Rajbanshi and an inhabitant of Itakumari of Rangpur district.<sup>2</sup> From this book come the names of eleven more brave women Zaminders, who led the subjects of the Rangpur Rebellion against the British tyrant. They are Rani Jaymani Devi Chowdhurani, Ananga Majuri Devi Chowdhurani & Ananga Majuri Devi Chowdhurani in Tapa estate, Rani Saradamoyee Devi Chowdhurani in Itakumari, Rani Bijaya Devi Chowdhurani, Rani Chandi Devi Chowdhurani, Rani Pabitra Devi Chowdhurani and Rani Jagadeswari Jaydurga Devi Chowdhurani in Bamandanga, Rani Jaydurga Devi Chowdhurani in Ghoraghat, Rani Shyam Sundari Devi Chowdhurani in Dimla and Rani Bhabatarini Debi Chowdhurani in Manthana.<sup>3</sup> Pandit Yadveswar Tarkaratna considered that Ratiram Das to be a contemporary of Rangpur Rebellion of 1783 CE.<sup>4</sup>

According to the writings of Ratiram Das, there are five Zamindaries created as a result of the destruction of Fatepur Chakla by the Mughal Army in the last half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They were Gharialdanga, Panga, Fatepur, Bamandanga and Manthana (Pirgachha).<sup>5</sup> Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani (1765-1802 CE) was the wife of Zamindar Narayan Chandra Chowdhury at the Manthana estate (Pirgacha of Rangpur district in Bangladesh). She started ruling with her supremacy over 183 taluks or village of Manthana estate since 1765 CE, after the death of her husband

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<sup>2</sup> Sengupta, Abhijit, Ibid & Rashid, S.M. Rangpur Ding- er Prekshapat, November 29, 2022, Banik Barta, [https://bonikerbarta.net/magazine\\_details/4348](https://bonikerbarta.net/magazine_details/4348)

<sup>3</sup> Das, Goutam Kumar. 2018. A Review of Past Presence of Devi Chowdhurani and the then Societal Structures of Rangpur, Bangladesh, Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology, Volume 15, Number 2, pp. 40-60

<sup>4</sup> Rashid, S.M., Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Rashid, S.M., Ibid

till 1801 CE. Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani acquired the Zamindari at that time when the East India Company obtained Diwani in Bengal in 1765 CE. It was that time, when the 'Plunder of Plassey' was going on the entire province of Bengal. The native industry was gradually being declined by the Company's revenue policies and exploitation. Almost everyone from the peasants to the Zamindars, was devastated by the tyranny and plundering of the British revenue-collecting officials. Devi Chowdhurani emerged in this historical context where peasants and artisans lost their livelihood and embarked on the path of the rebellion.

According to the report of Lieutenant Brenan's, the Army Commander of British East India Company, Devi Chowdhurani was a 'female dacoit' associate with Bhavani Pathak.<sup>6</sup> She lived in boats and had a large force of armed retainers in her pay. She committed dacoities on her own account, besides receiving a share of the booty obtained by Bhavani Pathak. Lieutenant Brenan also wrote, her title 'Chowdhurani' meant that she was a Zamindar, most likely a small Zaminder. That's why she always hid in the boat.<sup>7</sup>

It should be mentioned here that during the Nawabi period several people lost their land due to feudal exploitation and some of them chose robberies as a profession, but their number was very less. Since the beginning of the British rule in Bengal, a new Zamindari system was formed as a result of the British agrarian policy. Under this new system of Zamindari, the peasants became so desolate under the ultimate exploitation and oppression that some of them were forced to choose the path of robbery.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, during the British rule, the Company aimed to collect the highest amount of revenue, surpassing all the records of the previous era.<sup>9</sup> The inevitable result of this is that the peasants and the villagers were left unable to pay the revenue and some of them join the bandits.<sup>10</sup> Compounding this situation was the famine of the 1770s, which ruined almost all the peasants and their families in Bengal. In 1771 more than one-third of the cultivable land was returned in the public accounts as 'Deserted'.<sup>11</sup> By this time, the situation had reached such a critical state that who are alive were eating the dead eating.<sup>12</sup> In 1772, the cold weather brought them down upon the harvest fields of Lower Bengal, burning, plundering, ravaging in body of fifty thousand people.<sup>13</sup> In this span of time the

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<sup>6</sup> Vas, J.A. 1911. Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers Rangpur, Allahabad, Pioneer Press. p. 29

<sup>7</sup> Vas, J.A. Ibid, p. 29

<sup>8</sup> Mill, James. Zamindari Settlement in Bengal, Vol. 1, APP. VII. P. 158

<sup>9</sup> Mukherjee Ramkrishna. The rise and fall of East India Company, p. 204

<sup>10</sup> Kabiraj, Narahari. 1978. Swadhinata Sangrame Bangla, Kolkata, Manisha, p. 25

<sup>11</sup> Palatika. Hustabood accounts of Beerbhoom for the Bengali year 1178. C.O.R. 1868. W.W. Hunter, The Annals of Rural Bengal, New York, p. 63

<sup>12</sup> Sinha, J. C., Economic Annals of Bengal, p. 98

<sup>13</sup> Letter from thr President and Council (Secret Department) to the Court of Directors, dated 15<sup>th</sup> January 1773. Para, -13. I.O.R, 1868, W.W. Hunter, The Annals of Rural Bengal, New York, p. 71

activities of robbery were accelerated. Devi Chowdhurani committed robbery by taking wealth from the rich to give to the poor, which is mentioned in the folk-song and the folk-tale of that time.

At the beginning of British rule, several small Zamindars in Bengal who could not meet their revenue at the stipulated time in the structure of new Agrarian system, they were suffering and misery at the hands of the Nazims appointed by the British Government.<sup>14</sup> While Devi Chowdhurani was the Zamindar of Manthara estate, Devi Singh was the Izaradar of Rangpur. He was famous for his highest degree of torture on the peasants. J.D. Patterson, the Chief of the 'Rangpur Commission' (which was formed after the Rangpur Rebellion of 1783) wrote in 1780 CE an additional revenue of Rs 162,401 was levied on the people of Rangpur. For collecting this revenue several types of taxes were levied on the people. The Zamindars were not spared from Devi Singh's oppression. He forced the Zamindars to pay *Awab*<sup>15</sup> and silver coin *Arkat*, tax introduced by the French.<sup>16</sup> For failure to pay taxes, Zamindars and peasants were subjected to physical torture, even confiscation and sale of their property.<sup>17</sup> Some women Zamindars of Rangpur and Dinajpur regions were subjected to the oppression of Devi Singh. Their jewelry and valuable goods were sold for debt.<sup>18</sup> Several local Zamindars and peasants fled the area after not being able to endure these tortures.<sup>19</sup> There were allegations of cruelty against those he employed in tax collection. They were Hararam Sen, Krishna Prasad, Surya Narayan, Bahadur Singh.<sup>20</sup> After complaining to the Collector of Rangpur, Devi Singh imprisoned Shiva Chandra Roy, the Zamindar of Itakumari, and subjected him to severe torture.

In this situation Rani Jaydurga Chowdhurani mobilized the peasants to raise the banner of rebellion to get rid of this oppression. Along with other Zamindars of Rangpur also united against the tyranny of Devi Singh and his associate Hararam Sen. According to Ratiram Das's 'Jagger' songs - 'all the Zamindars gathered at the conference hall adjoining the temple of Siva Chandra Roy's palace of Itakumari. The peasants also kept standing, their hand folded and tears rolling down the chest.' This was the preparatory stage in 1783 when the peasants in Rangpur rose in rebellion under the leadership of Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani and Shiva Chandra Roy.<sup>21</sup> Further Ratiram Das wrote, Shiva Chandra Roy lost his temper and spoke 'since the Rajput robber (Devi Singh) is a scoundrel, you should all drive him out'

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<sup>14</sup> Roy, Suprakash. 1972, Bharater Krishak Bidroho O Ganatantrik Krishak Sangram, Unabinsha Satabdi, Kolkata, DNBA Brothers, p. 43

<sup>15</sup> Das. Sukumar. 1982. Uttar Banger Itihas, Kolkata, Kumar Sahitya Prakashan, pp. 179-182

<sup>16</sup> Rashid, S.M., Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Roy, Nikhilnath. 1978. Murshidabad Kahini, Kolkata, Puthipatra, pp. 337-361

<sup>18</sup> Roy, Nikhilnath. Ibid, pp. 337-361

<sup>19</sup> Roy, Nikhilnath. Ibid, pp. 337-361

<sup>20</sup> Rashid, S.M., Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Das, Goutam Kumar, Ibid, pp. 40-60

but Devi Chowdhurani said ‘Are you not men –are not you strong ? Though I am born a woman, I can seize him and cut him to pieces with a sword.’ Thus, Devi Chowdhurani not only supported the peasants in the Rangpur rebellion, but also led the massive rebellion against Devi Singh in Rangpur region in 1783 CE.<sup>22</sup>

During the Sannyas and Fakir Rebellion, Devi Chowdhurani was closely contact with Majnu Shah, the leader of the Fakir and Bhabani Pathak, the leader of Sannyas to keep peace and harmony in the peasant community around her estate.<sup>23</sup> Devi Chowdhurani was mentioned as a leader of the Sannyas and Fakir Rebellion in Government documents from June 1787.<sup>24</sup> At that time, Majnu Shah, Musa Shah, Bhavani Pathak and Devi Chowdhurani took the lead and fought against the British and the Zaminder’s Burkandazes. They looted the rich and plundered the Government revenue out of pique.<sup>25</sup> This activity of the rebels created a hindrance in the revenue collection of the British ruler. In 1787, some merchants complained to Mr. Williams, the Customs Superintendent of Dhaka that a dacoit named Bhavani Pathak had robbed their boat on the way.<sup>26</sup> In view of this, the Superintendent of Dhaka sent a group of Barkandaz with a warrant to arrest Bhavani Pathak. But Bhavani Pathak refused to accept the arrest warrant or the British as ruler of the country<sup>27</sup> and sought he the help of Devi Chowdhurani. When Devi Chowdhurani cooperated with him, he led a group of rebel soldiers and robbed boats carrying goods of English and native merchants.<sup>28</sup>

According to Goutam Kumar Das, during this period Devi Chowdhurani perhaps got involved with the brigandage under Bhavani Pathak Levantine herself for few days in order to collect the money and man-power to rescue her Zamindari.<sup>29</sup> Whatever, due to their continuous attacks, the administration of a large area of Mymensingh and Bogra districts was on the verge of being broke down. Finally, a group of British troops led by Lt. Brenan was sent against Bhavani Pathak. Pathak’s rebel soldiers fought a water battle with this British troop and defeated. Bhavani Pathak himself killed in the battle. As a result of the defeat, the British captured seven boats with full of arms of the rebels.<sup>30</sup> Perhaps Devi Chowdhurani was not with Bhavani Pathak during this battle. It is known from the letters and accounts of

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<sup>22</sup> Das, Goutam Kumar, Ibid, pp. 40-60

<sup>23</sup> Vas, J.A. Ibid, p. 29-30 & Ghosh, J.M. Sanyasi & Fakir Raiders in Bengal, Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, p. 36

<sup>24</sup> Vas, J.A. Ibid, p. 29-30

<sup>25</sup> Chandra, A. N. 1977. The Sannyasi Rebellion, Calcutta, Ratna Prakasan, p. 123

<sup>26</sup> Ghosh, J.M., Ibid, P. 108

<sup>27</sup> Ghosh, J.M., Ibid, P. 108

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Lt. Brenan to the Collector of Rangpur, 28<sup>th</sup> June 1787

<sup>29</sup> Das, Goutam Kumar, Ibid, pp 40-60

<sup>30</sup> Glazier, G. Report on the District of Rangpur, p. 67

Richard Goodlad, the Collector of Rangpur and Lieutenant Brennan, Army Officer that they were always in fear of Devi Chowdhurani's attack and insurgency.<sup>31</sup>

According to the report of G. Glazier, after the death of Bhavani Pathak, Devi Chowdhurani continued to struggle alone against the British but what became of her fate or how she came to her end is not known.<sup>32</sup> She fought not only with Bhavani Pathak, Majnu Shah and Musa Shah but Ramanand Gosai, or Nuruluddin, the great leaders of Sannyas and Fakir Rebellion also.<sup>33</sup> Lt. Brennan wrote letter to the Collector of Rangpur on 12th July, 1787, seeking permission to arrest the female dacoit; however, the Collector replied that "I cannot at present give you any orders with respect to the female Dakoite mentioned in your letter. If on examination of Bengal (Bengali) papers which you have sent it shall appear that there are sufficient grounds for apprehending her and if one shall be found within the limits of my jurisdiction I shall hereafter send you such orders as may be necessary."<sup>34</sup> However, even though Devi Chowdhurani was not arrested, she was subjected to extreme tortured. Company rulers continued to exert pressure on her by raising tax rate. As a result, Devi Chowdhurani hid and lived in disguise and suffered hardship during her life.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, a letter from Manthana estate written by the Richard Goodlad, Acting Collector of Rangpur to Warren Hastings was found, in which Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani was accused of non-payment of taxes.<sup>36</sup> It stated that Jaydurga Chowdhurani went into hiding. That is why the Richard Goodlad wrote a letter to Warren Hastings for approval the post of Sezawal appointed for the collection of tax in the absence of Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani from 1778 AD.<sup>37</sup> Richard Goodlad mentioned that the reason behind the concealment of Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani having absconded from the dread of a warrant. Thus a portion of Devi Jaydurga's Manthana estate was sale off at a nominal price on the pretext of non-payment of Government revenue. Not only that in the year 1787, the total tax was fixed in Rs 34,379, which was too much. A deduction of Rs. 3000 was asked on the behalf of Manthana estate but the Collector did not accept that proposal. In 1790, the Board of Revenue formulated such a law by which the minor and female Zamindars were disqualified as landholders. Needless to say, Jaydurga Chowdhurani was deprived of her Manthana estate by this Act. But Richard Goodlad mentioned about Jaydurga Chowdhurani that she was 47 years of age in 1790 and splendid to see. He also mentioned that she is one of the most worthy Zamindars of Rangpur, she is capable of writing, reading and quite up and doing

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<sup>31</sup> Letter from Collector of Rangpur to Lt. Brennan, 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1787 & Glazier G. Report on Rangpur, p. 69

<sup>32</sup> Glazier, G. Ibid, p. 67

<sup>33</sup> Sengupta, Abhijit, Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ghosh, J.M., Ibid, P. 109 & Chandra, A. N. Ibid, p. 143

<sup>35</sup> Das, Goutam Kumar, Ibid, pp 40-60

<sup>36</sup> Letter to Warren Hasting from Richard Goodlad, dated 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1779

<sup>37</sup> Letter to Warren Hasting from Richard Goodlad, dated 24<sup>th</sup> July, 1779

for managing her own concerns. The Board of Revenue thus has withdrawn the order of disqualification from her and she is then exempted from the General Regulations and able to appoint the *Gomostah* according to her will.<sup>38</sup>

Although some sources show that Devi Jaydurga Chowdhurani was martyred in battle with Warren Hastings on the first Thursday of Baisakh in 1783 while fighting against the British<sup>39</sup> but Dr. Das presents information in this regards.<sup>40</sup> According to Das, Devi Chowdhurani's death was a rumour because no one was the witness of that incident. Apart from that none of the historian, surveyor, administrator or Gazetteer recorded this death in the battle against the British. Dr. Das cites two seals issued by Devi Chowdhurani in this regard. The first one was a *Farman* or seal issued on 5<sup>th</sup> Magh, 1176 Bangabda (1769-1770 CE). Another was the Mushkali Chukani Patta issued on 25<sup>th</sup> Kartik, 1197 Bangabda (1790-1791 CE). These seals were collected by Abdul Gafoor of Pargachha and published in *Unnayan* Magazine. According to Dr. Das both seals were proved that Devi Chowdhurani did not die in 1783 CE. Perhaps she was hid himself. After the end of the Rangpur Rebellion in 1787 CE, she resumed Zamindari rule with full dignity.<sup>41</sup>

Devi Chowdhurani's noble munificence enabled the villagers of the Manthana estate to survive through the crisis just after a few years of famine of Bengal. She collected revenue from her peasants, only to pay her higher authority. She never built a large palace or lived a luxurious life for herself or her family. Rather she excavated ponds, constructed roads and advanced financial help to her poor starved peasants. Devi Chowdhurani was famous for her love for peasants and public welfare. She was so popular that people of Rangpur named the village, nearby Railway Station, Schools, Market, Bus stop, and road after her name. She was regarded as 'Devi Chandi'. Her subjects love her so much that they called her 'Ma Jay Durga'. Her wooden images are worshiped in different temples of the Teesta basin of Rangpur and Karla basin of Jalpaiguri district till date. Not only that, in the last half of 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the people of India were immersed in poverty, illiteracy, casteism, when nationalism did not emerge, Devi Chowdhurani led the people to rebellion and freed the people of greater Rangpur from tyranny of the Izaradar Devi Singh. In this revolt, being a woman Zamindar, she mobilized some other Zamindars and fought against the British rulers more than once. The most important thing with her was the support of people. Therefore, she can easily be awarded the title of the first women warrior of anti-British in Bengal.

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<sup>38</sup> Letter to Charles Stuart, Board of Revenue from C. Purling, Collector, dated 8<sup>th</sup> September, 1790

<sup>39</sup> Purakayastha, Tilak. Durgapurur Khilane Pratidhanita hoto 'Bandemataram', [https://theoffnews.com/2020/07/blog-post\\_3.html](https://theoffnews.com/2020/07/blog-post_3.html)

<sup>40</sup> Das, Goutam Kumar, Ibid, pp 40-60

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