

## **Identity and Narratives: Dalits and memories of 1857**

In the Azamgarh district of UP there is a village called Majhauwa, which is predominantly inhabited by Dalit castes like Chamar, Pasi, Dhobi, Mali and so on. Next to a narrow footpath inside a field in this village there are four cemented stones. These are called Shahid Baba by the villagers. The Dalits of this village worship these stones with red powder; they pour water on them and offer home-made sweets like 'thekua', etc. as a form of worship on them regularly. All newly married brides of these castes visit the Shahid Baba's stones to offer prayers at them for their future happiness. On enquiring about the history of these stones, the village school master who is a Chamar by caste said that four Chamars of this village laid down their lives during the 1857 rebellion. These four men started appearing in the dreams of the villagers and conveying messages saying that if they prayed to these four martyrs they would all prosper. Since then they have been incarnated as gods in the eyes of the villagers, who constructed shrines in their memories and began to pray at them for happiness and prosperity.<sup>1</sup>

Around the village Shahapur in Arrah district of Bihar, a deity called Rajit Baba is worshipped by some lower caste communities of that region. His *thaans* (memorial stones) are usually found under *peepal* trees which are decorated with red loin cloths, red flag, red powder marks, incense sticks, home made sweets and so on. People of the villages pray for the fulfillment of their wishes at the *thaans* and after they are fulfilled, offer *prasad* there. It is said that Rajit Baba became a martyr while fighting against the British during the 1857 rebellion. He then became a god incarnate.<sup>2</sup>

These are only two examples which show how, in various regions of north India, martyrs of the 1857 rebellion belonging to lower castes have become integral components of the lives of the Dalits living there. This fact is interesting since a perusal of the mainstream academic history of the 1857 revolution shows that the role of the dalits is not even acknowledged in it. But the two examples given above show that they have given god-like status to their own heroes of the 1857 rebellion. Even today in many villages of north India where the revolution was concentrated one can find stories and myths popular among the dalit communities, centering around the 1857 revolt. For example, there is one myth that is narrated in the village Janaidih in Bihar which

was an important center of the revolt. The story goes that there was once a man called Raghu Chamar in the village who was very skilled at using the katta (an indigenous knife like instrument). He was a soldier in Kunwar Singh's army and fought against the British in the 1857 revolt, in which he lost his life. The day he died, the seeds of a guler tree, which is still there in the village, sprouted, but although the tree grew into a thick, tall one, no Guler flowers have ever been seen on it. However, the villagers believed that exactly at the stroke of midnight on full moon nights, one single flower is seen blooming on the tree. Many people claim to have seen it over the years, which has helped to establish the authenticity of this story.<sup>3</sup>

Another story that is popular among the dalits in the villages adjoining Bithoor in UP is that of Ganga Baba, a local hero of the 1857 revolt. The story goes like this:

Gangu Baba was a youth living in a nearby village. It was said that he was so strong that he could change the course of rivers and chop off the heads of mountains. He could fight against two tigers together. Gangu Baba was as kind as he was brave. If he saw a hungry person he would give him his own bread to eat. If he saw someone

shivering in the cold he gave his own blanket to wrap. People also say that if he heard a deer crying at night he used to get so upset that he would go to the forest and break the bones of tigers. Although he was born in a low caste poor family, he commanded great respect in the village. Rich and influential landlords used to leave their chairs to embrace him.

Once Gangu Baba was returning from the forest with a dead tiger on his back, which he had killed unarmed single-handed. Just then Nana Saheb Peshwa, the king of Bithoor, passed by with his army. At that time Nana Saheb Peshwa had already blown the bugle of the battle against the British. When he saw the strapping young man walking nonchalantly with a tiger on his back, he stopped him and asked him to join his army. Gangu Baba was very happy to hear this. He joined the army and while there he once alone killed nearly 150 British soldiers with his sword. This enraged the British, who tried their best to catch him dead or alive. After immense efforts they succeeded in capturing him. Then the cruel British officers tied him to the back of a horse and dragged him all the way to Kanpur, which was a long way away. There they

killed him by hanging him from a neem tree in Chunniganj, Kanpur.<sup>4</sup>

This is the story of Gangu Baba, the brave youth of Bithoor, whose story is part of the oral history of the region about the 1857 revolt. To make sure that the story remains for posterity, the dalits of the region raised enough money to commission a statue of Gangu Baba. The statue is installed in Chunniganj, where he had been mercilessly killed by the British as a punishment for his brave act of killing so many of their fellowmen.<sup>5</sup>

The existence of such kinds of myths centering around dalit heroes of the 1857 revolt and the deification of many of them proves that there is a wide gap between people's history and mainstream academic history writing in which dalits have not been acknowledged as agents and actors of the revolution who decided the course of the events that took place at that time. Their role in the revolution has been mentioned in passing by saying that they functioned as soldiers, stick wielders and guards of the feudal landlords and kings like Rani Laxmibai, Tatyā Tope and Nana Saheb Peshwa, who were the persons chiefly in command of the revolution.

However, a reconnaissance of many villages of north India shows that the 1857 episode is still quite popular among many dalit castes.<sup>6</sup> The rebellion was concentrated in the north Indian Gangetic belt beginning from Delhi to Bengal. It began in Meerut on 10 May after news spread that the garrisons in Delhi had revolted and expelled the British. It soon spread to other parts of UP like Aligarh, Etawah, Mainpuri, Etah and so on (Mukherjee 2001: 65). In this way it moved to other parts of UP and Bihar like Kanpur, Awadh, Banaras, Azamgarh, Gorakhpur, Gonda, Bahraich, Sitapur, Ghazipur, Sultanpur, Western Bihar and finally to Bengal. In Upper India it was more in the form of a turbulent agrarian upheaval gathering together a wide variety of discontents. The rebellion commanded extensive popular support, especially in Oudh, throughout the North Western Provinces and western Bihar. Sepoy discontent was an essential ingredient of the rebellion but the mutiny derived its strength from the civil population (Metcalf 1990: 60). Peasants, political sadhus (Pinch 1996: 9), local kings and most importantly the conservative sections of society, who had suffered greatly under the British rule, became united against fighting colonialism.

The British Government put up a stiff resistance to the rebellion. Their retribution was harsh and deadly. Village after village were burnt or felled with cannon balls to quash the rebellion. Thousands of rebels were hung from gallows and an equally large number were hung from trees as instant punishment. The rebellion left a deep imprint in the minds of the common people that was very different from the scanty recorded history of that period. Recorded history only told the stories of rich feudal landlords, and kings and queens like Rani Laxmibai and Tantya Tope, but the stories of unsung heroes who played their role behind the curtain of written history were circulated only in oral history in rural north India, especially among the marginalised dalit castes and communities.

### **Dalits and Memories of 1857**

The Dalits have an emotional link with the 1857 War of Independence for they believe that it was initiated by them. They claim that the Soldier Revolt by the mostly Dalit Indian soldiers in the British Army that took place in Jhansi in 1857, snowballed into the War of Independence. It was a War of Independence since the Dalits were fighting for their motherland rather than to gain power. The War was led by

Bhau Bakshi and Puran Kori and with them was Jhalkaribai who fought bravely against the British for the sake of her motherland (Dinkar 1990: 62). The Dalit narrative of the first freedom struggle is filled with stories about brave women martyrs belonging to suppressed communities like Jhalkaribai, Avantibai, Pannadhai, Udadevi and Mahaviridevi (Dinkar ibid: 27). According to them, the 1857 War of Independence, which the elites claim was started by Mangal Pandey, was actually inspired by Matadin Bhangi. The story is narrated in such a manner that Matadin Bhangi emerges as the source of inspiration for the revolt.

Their narrative is as follows:

'There was a factory in Barrackpore where cartridges were manufactured. Many of the workers of this factory belonged to the untouchable communities. One day one of the workers felt thirsty. He asked a soldier for a mug of water. That soldier was Mangal Pandey. Mangal Pandey, a Brahmin, refused him water because the worker was an untouchable. This was very humiliating for the worker. He retaliated to the Brahmin soldier saying,

*" Bara awa hai Brahaman ka beta. Jin kartuson ka tum upayog karat ho, unpar gaaye or suar ki charbi lagawal jaat hai, jinhe tum apan daatun se torkar*



*banduk mein bharat ho. O samay tomhar jati aur dharam kahan jawat. Dhikkar tumhare is brahmanatwa ka "* [You claim to be a highly respectable Brahmin, but the cartridges which you bite with your teeth and insert in your guns, are all rubbed with the fat of cows and pigs. What happens to your caste and religion then? Curse on your Brahminism]'

'Hearing this soldier was taken by surprise. That untouchable was none other than Matadin Bhangi, who opened the eyes of the Indian soldier and ignited the first spark of India's independence in the Cantonment. The words of Matadin Bhangi spread like wildfire through the Cantonment. Very soon the torch of independence was lighted. On the morning of 1 March 1857, Mangal Pandey broke the line during the parade. Accusing the British of hurting their religious sentiments, he started firing indiscriminately at them. This was the moment when the first battle lines against the British were drawn. Mangal Pandey was arrested in an injured condition. He was court-martialed, and in 1857 he was hung from the gallows before all the soldiers. Mangal

Pandey's sacrifice became an inspiration for all the soldiers. On 10 May 1857, the floodgate of the independence movement burst in Barrackpore in which many brave sons of India became martyrs. In the chargesheet that was made, the first name was that of Matadin Bhangi, who was later arrested. All the arrested revolutionaries were court-martialed. Matadin was charged for treason against the British.' (Dinkar op cit : 37).

Nath (1998: 12) in his book '*1857 Ki Kranti Ka Janak: Nagvanshi Bhangi Matadin Hela*' also narrates a similar story in which Matadin Bhangi has been claimed to be the father (*janak*) of the 1857 rebellion. In these narratives, Matadin Bhangi is presented as the moving force behind the 1857 Revolt. They also try to show how the forward class refused to hand a glass of water to the untouchables although they bit cartridges rubbed with cow's fat. Thus, these narratives, along with a description of the nationalist movement, questions the hierarchical structure of the Indian society. The rigid structure in which the untouchables are not allowed to go near the forward castes because of their low birth and ritual 'dirtiness' has been strongly criticised. To prove the historicity of this

event, a book written by one Shri Acharya Bhagwan Deb called 'The immortal revolutionaries of India', has been quoted by Dinkar (Dinkar op. cit.: 38).

The memory of Matadin Bhangi and his contribution to the nationalist movement is celebrated in a number of ways by the Dalits. Many songs have been composed in his honour that are sung in rallies and functions, both cultural and political. Plays are staged at commemorative functions held in his honour in towns and villages. Special issues of magazines are brought out with articles by eminent writers highlighting his contributions. A fortnightly newspaper *Dalit Kesri* published a special issue on the 1857 Revolt<sup>7</sup> in which the lead article was on Matadin Bhangi. *Anarya Bharat*, another Dalit newspaper that is published from Mainpuri in UP, brought out a special feature on the contribution of Dalits to the 1857 Revolt. In all these publications they projected Matadin Bhangi as a pioneer of the First War of Indian Independence. *Himayati*, a Dalit literary magazine, in its May 1996 issue celebrating the memory of 1857 published a special feature and lead article on the contribution of Matadin Bhangi. Dr. Sohanpal Sumanakshar wrote very strongly in the same issue that the first person who sowed the seed of the 1857 revolution was Matadin

Bhangi but unfortunately historians have forgotten his contribution.<sup>8</sup>

In this manner, the elite nationalist history has been subverted by the Dalits in their favour. Kuar Singh, Tatya Tope and Nana Saheb do not figure in the Dalit narrative of the 1857 freedom struggle. The people who figure are Jhalkariibai, Udadevi, Avantibai, Mahaviridevi, Pannadhai, Chetram Jatav, Ballu Mehtar, Banke Chamar and Vira Pasi, who were born in the lower stratas of society. Although the elite nationalist heroes are not negated, they are completely ignored. Their emphasis is on the sacrifice of the Dalit martyrs for the nation in spite of their low birth and poor socio-economic status. Their brave confrontation with the British has also been highlighted. The story of Balluram Mehtar and Chetram Jatav has been described in the following manner:

'Although the dalits were born in the lowest caste of the Indian caste hierarchy and suffered great hardship because of their poor socio-economic status, they never sold themselves for their country. No one can accuse a single dalit of doing so. Whenever the need arose, they sacrificed their lives for their motherland. Among the brave sons of the country, the names of

Balluram Mehtar and Chetram Jatav are written in shining letters. As soon as the news of the Barrackpore revolution reached the people, a mob of revolutionaries took to the streets. Mr. Phillips, who was an officer of the Eta District, tried to control the mob. On 26 May 1857, in the Soro region of Eta district, Chetram Jatav and Balluram Mehtar joined into the Barrackpore revolution without caring for their lives. In this revolution, Sadashiv Mehre, Chaturbhuj Vaish etc. were also present. Chetram Jatav and Balluram, who were the moving forces behind the revolution, were tied to trees and shot. The rest were hung from trees in the Kasganj area' (Dinkar op. cit: 56).

The bravery of martyr Banke Chamar is also described. He lived in village Kuarpur, Macchli Shahar, *janpad* Jaunpur. When the revolution failed, the British declared Banke Chamar and 18 of his associates as *baghi* (revolutionaries). Banke Chamar was ordered to be hung after being arrested. Thus this brave revolutionary laid down his life for the country (Dinkar op. cit: 59).

Amar Shaheed Vira Pasi is another Dalit who is remembered as a brave warrior in the Dalit narrative. He was a security guard of Raja Beni Madhav Singh of Murar

Mau, in Rae Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. Raja Beni Madhav Singh was arrested for taking part in the Revolt. One night, Vira Pasi entered the prison and helped the king escape. This was a big insult to the British administration. They decided to capture Vira Pasi dead or alive, and placed a reward of Rs. 50,000 on his head. However, they were unable to capture him (Dinkar op. cit: 64).

Another story narrated about their role in the 1857 movement is situated in the village Magarwara, about 10 kilometers from Unnao on the Lucknow highway. They claim that on 20 July 1857 a small battalion of the British army under the leadership of General Henry Havelock was passing through Magarwara to help another battalion that had got stuck in the Residency. Nearly 2,000 Pasis came out of their hamlets and pelted the battalion with stones, which forced them to return to Kanpur Cantonment. On 4 August 1857 the same battalion came to the village, this time with a lot of preparations. When the Pasis of Magarwara tried to stop them from moving forward a battle ensued and nearly 2,000 Pasis were killed (Pasi 1998: 34).

Yet another story narrated by the Pasis is situated in village Bani on the banks of River Sai, close to Magarwara. This region consisted of many small Pasi hamlets. When the

British army passed by this highway it faced a stiff resistance from the Pasis. Angered by this, the British officers asked the Pasis to vacate the area within five minutes. When the Pasis refused, the British announced that they would blow up the hamlets with canons. This caused great alarm. People ran here and there to save themselves and their families but in spite of this many Pasis were killed in the canon firing. The British found this region very salubrious and decided to build a fort where their soldiers, who had faced stiff resistance by the Pasis after leaving Kanpur Cantonment, could rest and restore their vigour. This story is a part of the collective memory and oral tradition of the Pasis of that region and is often presented in plays and songs. The song is :

*Bani bani kati bani, ban ke bigri bani*

*Angrezon ke tope se urhi, phir bani rahi bani.*

(The village Bani was made, then destroyed,

again made and again destroyed;

the cannon balls of the British blew it apart,

then Bani was once again made and remained Bani.)

The story is further narrated that the next day Gen. Havelock once again moved forward with his troop to free the soldiers trapped in the Residency. Once again he had to

face the wrath of Indian freedom fighters, this time at the Alambagh Bhavya Bhawan. Many soldiers, both Indian and British lost their lives in this battle. When the general reached Dilkushabagh, he again had to fight against Indian freedom fighters. These incidents took a toll of British soldiers and drained the energy of Gen. Havelock. He fell ill and finally succumbed to his illness on 24 November 1857. He was buried at the British Cemetary in Alambagh (Pasi op cit: 36). This story is recorded in a documentation of the contributions of the Pasis in the freedom struggle of the country, from where it is once again transmitted to the oral memory of the Dalits.

Another story that is narrated in glowing terms is about the husband of Udadevi, Makka Pasi who, like his wife, laid down his life for the sake of the country. The incident took place on 10 June 1857, when a small battalion of British soldiers under the leadership of Henry Lawrence was passing through Barabanki on their way to Chinhat from Avadh. At village Chinhat, Makka Pasi gathered an army of 200 Pasis and killed many British soldiers. Seeing a danger in him, Captain Lawrence shot Makka Pasi to stop him from killing more soldiers. The Pasis claim that Udadevi and Makka Pasi are the only couple in complete world history



where both the partners have become martyrs. This couple has elevated the glory of not just the Pasi community but the entire country. Each Indian should be proud of such a couple which has made such a supreme sacrifice for their country (Pasi 2005: 90-1).

### **Identity, Past and Narratives**

The Dalits, through their narratives of the 1857 Revolution, have not only tried to establish their own heroes, but also tried to dethrone the existing high-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives.

Through the story of Jhalkaribai also, who was said to have fought alongside Queen (Rani) Laxmi Bai, the Dalits want to prove that the queen was strongly influenced by Jhalkaribai, who advised her regarding her war strategies. Although Jhalkaribai belonged to a lower caste, she was as skilled as the queen and also had a sound military acumen. Through the story of Jhalkaribai the dalits also want to subvert the existing notion that Rani of Jhansi died a

chivalrous death in the battle against the British. Rather she has been shown as a coward who ran away from the battle field.

### The story of Jhalkaribai is narrated in the following way:

Jhalkaribai was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1830 in village Bhojla in Jhansi. Being the only child of her parents, father Mool Chandra and mother Dhania, she was quite pampered and spoilt by them. The environment in her house was free, healthy and open, and she grew up with an independent spirit. As a child she was also inculcated with a strong notion of patriotism. As a result she was imbued with a great love for her country and a sense of anger against the British for enslaving the country. Having a dusky complexion, big eyes and sharp features, Jhalkari was striking to look at. Mool Chandra and Dhania were honoured to have such a daughter and addressed her as Jhalri with love.

As Jhalkari grew older, she distanced herself from the conventional feminine attributes. Instead she learnt to shoot arrows and guns, ride horses, and hunting and shooting wild animals. Her father also encouraged her and also taught her many skills of fighting. She thus became highly competent in martial arts although her formal education remained neglected. All her time was spent in playing with her friends, practicing military skills, going to the temple to pray, singing, dancing and so on. But her mind was elsewhere.

Once Jhalkari went to a fair with her mother, aunts, friends etc. Like most females, they all headed towards the bangle seller who had a wide array of bright, colourful, sparkling glass bangles before him on a tray. Jhalkari's companions started trying on the bangles to see which would look best on their wrists. However Jhalkari refused to join them. When her friends insisted that she should also try some on, Jhalkari said laughingly to the bangle seller, 'If you have any iron bangles, give them to me. How many times can I change broken glass bangles?' At that time Jhalkari had joked but it was true that only iron bangles can shackle strong hands. Her aunt had commented, 'This girl is trying to fly in the sky, stay put on the ground, my girl'.

Once when Jhalkari was twelve, she went to the forest to cut wood. She had just started cutting when she saw a wolf coming towards her. Before she could collect her wits it sprang towards her. By that time Jhalkari had attained reasonable skill in martial arts, so she immediately tried to hit the wolf with her axe. However the animal was too big and strong for the twelve year old girl. The axe fell from her hands, but undaunted, she tried to defend herself by fighting off the wolf with her bare hands. After a fierce battle, she succeeded in killing the wolf, thanks to her fighting skills. Soaked in blood, with her clothes in tatters and wounds and scratches all over her body, she presented a sorry spectacle when she somehow managed to return home. Her parents and neighbours were amazed when they saw her condition and were thunderstruck when she told them that she had killed the wolf with her bare hands.

Another incident took place in 1850 when Jhalkari was sleeping at night with her mother. Suddenly a scream rent the night sky, accompanied with the words, 'Save me, save me, he is killing me!' Jhalkari immediately sprang up and ran outside to see what the matter was. It appeared that some dacoits had entered the house of the headman of the village and were attacking his family members. Jhalkari rushed inside to fetch a stout stick. She then ran to the headman's house and thrashed the dacoits soundly, which sent them fleeing from there. The headman and all the other villagers were very pleased with the bravery of the girl and were loud in their praises for her.

Jhalkaribai was married to one Puran Kori of Nayapura, Jhansi. Puran was an attractive youth with a good personality. A soldier in the army of Jhansi, Puran was extremely happy to get a wife whose interests matched his own. Jhalkari's mother-in-law, who was a maid servant of Rani Laxmibai, the queen of Jhansi, was also familiar with the masculine traits of her daughter-in-law, and she wholeheartedly accepted them. Once she took Jhalkari

with her to the palace on Shivratri. There Jhalkari met the queen, who took an immediate fancy to her. Since Laxmibai was herself very fond of hunting, shooting, riding and other outdoor activities, she made Jhalkari her special companion. Rani Laxmibai then decided to form a women's army and Jhalkari was made a member of it. Jhalkari and her husband were both very happy and her husband gave her special training at home to equip her with even more martial skills.

This was the period when the British had ensconced themselves firmly in India, and the protest against them by the Indians was also at its peak. On 10<sup>th</sup> May 1857, when the spark of rebellion was ignited in Meerut, the flames also reached Jhansi. On 6<sup>th</sup> June, Jhansi revolted. Puran Kori, Bhau Bakshi, Bakshish Ali and some other officers of the Jhansi army took control over the treasury chest and the armoury. A fierce battle ensued between the British army and the Jhansi army, but although Puran and the other officers fought bravely, it was soon apparent that they were losing. The queen was very worried about the situation but Jhalkari was more afraid that the queen, whom she loved dearly, would be taken captive by the British.

Jhalkari advised the queen to escape from the Jhansi fort so that she could foil the intentions of the British. The queen readily agreed since she too wanted to save her life. Jhalkari and the other women soldiers led the queen to the Bhandari Gate so that she could make good her escape. In the meantime the British had got news that Tatya Tope was arriving with his army to the aid of Jhansi. They immediately blocked the Bhandari Gate so that the army could not enter Jhansi, but by then the queen had left for Bithoor. Jhalkari, who resembled the queen a great deal, then donned the queen's dress. The whole day she fought pretending to be the queen, without the British being aware of the change.

Suddenly she heard the news that her husband Puran had been killed by the British army. The news affected her dreadfully. She started fighting with double vigour and killed many British soldiers, but her spirit was dead. A bullet hit her in the chest, throwing her off the horse. As she fell, a few more bullets hit her. She fell on the ground, never to rise again, leaving behind a legacy of sacrifice, love and patriotism, which history will never forget.<sup>19</sup>

The historicity of these narratives is questionable but the politics behind the creation and narration of these stories is to dethrone the established heroes of the mainstream narratives. A three-dimensional discursive strategy was adopted to achieve this aim. The first is to make allegations about the distortion of mainstream writings of the events of the 1857 struggle. The second is to establish their own heroes as freedom fighters who fought for their motherland. The third is to prove that zamindars, feudal lords, and the wealthy classes of the society were conspirators of the British. The educated Indian intelligentsia is also claimed to

be conspirators of the British. In the preface of his booklet '*Sepoy Mutiny 1857-58: An Indian Perfidy*', A.K. Biswas (1997: 22), a Dalit from West Bengal who later became an IAS officer, wrote:

'The Indian history has been subjected to calculated distortion at the hands of educated Indians. Instances are galore in many walks of life. The Sepoy Mutiny (1857-58) though not even two centuries old and though there is vast mass of contemporary literatures, has suffered the same mindless perversion, truth has been swept under the carpet. In other words, it has not been allowed to come to the light. The Sepoy Mutiny is hailed today universally as the first war of Indian Independence when the mutineers unfurled the banner of revolt against a mighty Empire. The contemporary literature, however, gives a very different, rather baffling, picture, the sepoys have been held therein as seditious, perfidious, evil and wrong doers.etc. They were condemned in strongest terms by Indian journalists who are held as pioneers and doyen. The feudal class, on the other hand lent strong moral and material support to the imperial forces which crushed the uprising. The glaring contradiction does not find any mention in the textbooks of history of our times

for reasons not far to seek, nor is it known to the generation of the day.’

These narratives of the past are being used by the Dalits to acquire power in the ongoing social struggle. They are also attempting to reshape the fractured and competing pasts from the present and acquire a position of authority for all the Dalit castes. This process of remaking the past is based on their contemporary socio-political and cultural experience of discrimination which they face in their everyday lives. They link their experiences of recent times with their remote past and authenticate the latter by establishing their historicity. Invention of history for the Dalits is thus a process of acquiring legitimacy for their identity by establishing the oldness of the tradition of sacrifice of their community for the nation and society. In this sense one can propose that the past can be an authority but the nature of the authority is seen as shifting, amorphous and amenable to intervention.

### **Reconstructing Histories and Politics of Future**

Why is it important for the Dalits to link themselves with the 1857 war of independence and why are the icons related with this incident more important than those of other

incidents? Why is 1857 so important for them? The reason may be that the events around this period are not well documented, so the Dalits find plenty of space to invent their history and posit their leaders in them. To the common people especially the dalits, the 1857 Revolt is highly romantic with a number of local heroic characters who fought valiantly against the British using indigeneous weapons. This notion provides the opportunity to create heroes belonging to their community with whom they can identify. The authenticity of these heroes is debatable but they have the power to stir the imagination of people. The events that took place in the twentieth century on the other hand are very well documented since the leaders of that period tried to build up a unified homogeneous story of India's independence. This gave little space to the Dalits since the story is dominated by upper-caste leaders whom they had to follow. It is true that many lower castes lost their lives in the Non-cooperation, Quit India and other such movements but the glory went to the upper-caste leaders who had organised them.

The 1857 movement was mainly confined to the northern part of India, which made it easier for the Dalits of this region in search of heroes, to invent and situate their heroes in places with heavy concentration of lower castes

like Awadh, Bundelkhand and Bhojpur. The memory of these events are not just part of Dalit memory but also a part of the broader collective memory of the region that is reflected in the songs, plays and other mediums of popular culture. This fact enabled the Dalits to invent their heroes and histories who could become both local heroes and identity markers for the entire community in its everyday struggle for dignity and self-respect. The Dalit leaders had understood that it was of paramount importance to link themselves with the nationalist narrative and assert their role in the freedom struggle. However they found it difficult to find space in the main phase of the freedom movement since in the period when the struggle for dalit uplift had picked up momentum, their leader Dr. Ambedkar had developed a rift with Mahatma Gandhi, the most important leader of this phase. Thus there was no option but to search for their heroes in the 1857 revolution so as not to antagonise the state, which legitimized the nationalist narrative. Since one of the catalysts for the emergence of a Dalit nationalist narrative was the dialogue with the state, they could not afford to ignore it. They could neither negate Ambedkar and his narrative of the nationalist movement nor the dominant nationalist narrative which is projected as the foundation of

the present state. The need to strike a balance between the two led the Dalits to search for their own heroes within the nationalist narrative. And the event which provided them the space to do so was the 1857 struggle.

Another reason why the Dalits found it crucial to link themselves with the 1857 struggle was to counter the allegations made by some intellectuals associated with the BJP that the Dalits were antinational. According to these intellectuals, Ambedkar was against the mainstream nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi and often supported the British. These ideologues try to belittle the untouchables by stating that they conquered India for the British- the Dusadhs and Bahelias fought for Lord Clive in the Battle of Plassey in 1757.<sup>10</sup> In a bid to oppose the efforts of the Dalits to write their own history and rupture the mainstream nationalist narrative, the All India History Compilation Project, formed by the RSS for propagating history based on the RSS ideology held a convention between 17 and 19 July 1999 in Allahabad. In this convention the custodian Moreshwar Neelkanth Pingale opined that writing the history of Shudras, *gwalas* and tribals created hatred among sections of society and caused problems for an Indianised social life.<sup>11</sup> In reaction to



statements like these the dalits were compelled to assert their role in the 1857 Revolt. They stated that their association with the first war gave them an exalted position in the history of India's nation building of the country. That there was a difference in opinion among the members of the BJP-RSS was obvious when the Governor of UP Suraj Bhan, in the same convention rebuked those attempting to deny the role of Dalits in the freedom struggle and said that they contributed to their greatest possible extent in the movement for independence. He added that but for Valmiki, the writer of *Ramayana* who belonged to a dalit community, no one would have known about Rama and Sita. He also mentioned the name of Jhalkaribai who in the guise of Rani of Jhansi, fought valiantly against the British in the first war of independence.<sup>12</sup>

### **Multiple Locations and Competing Politics**

From a study of the scattered information and narratives that appear in the folk tales and folk lore of the lower castes it is evident that many people of these castes were actively involved in the 1857 rebellion. In fact the massive scale on which the rebellion was launched could not have been possible without the participation of these castes,

but is disheartening to note that their contribution has neither been documented nor acknowledged in the Indian history writing. Whatever little mention there is of the role of the lower castes, it is only as servants of kings, feudal landlords and zamindars, which has either negated their contribution or marginalized them from the history of the rebellion (Rai 2005). It is true that the story of Jhalkaribai is linked with that of Rani Laxmibai and Udadevi's with that of Begum Hazrat Mahal, but at a time when most of the kings and landlords were joining forces with the British to seek benefits from them, it is imperative to evaluate the roles of these brave lower caste warriors in the right historical context. From these examples it appears that in the rebellion against the British the Dalits played sterling roles along with the upper caste kings, queens and landlords. In addition Dalit historians cite many examples of lower caste heroes who were not associated with any upper caste king or queen but fought against the British in their own capacity (see Dinkar op cit). Many extreme Ambedkarite and leftist journalists and scholars who are trying to link the rebellion with dissatisfied feudal lords, kings, soldiers and peasants are trying to negate the role of Dalits in it (Mishra and Kumar 2002: 12). Dalit intellectuals supported by BSP, which is trying to

mobilise grassroot Dalits using local heroes, histories, myths and legends found a wealth of resources in the oral history of the regions of UP centering around the 1857 rebellion ( see Narayan 2006). The political strategy of the party is to tell and retell the stories of these heroes, build memorials and organize celebrations around their stories repeatedly to build a collective memory in the psyche of the people. The stories are narrated in such a manner that the Dalits imagine the story of the making of this nation in which they played a significant role. Several books like *Swatantrata Sangram Mein Achhuton Ka Yogdan*, (Dinkar 1990), *Jhoothi Azadi* (Madan 1987), *Pasi Samaj ka Swatantrata mein Yogdan* (Pasi 1998), *Dalit DastaveJ* (Vidrohi 1989) and so on, document the contributions of various Dalit heroes in the 1857 rebellion. The sacrifices made by their ancestors are reinforced by saying that despite their sacrifices, the desires, dreams and aspirations for the nation state are yet to be fulfilled. These narratives help them to claim a respectable place in the contemporary process of nation building and a lion's share in State-sponsored development projects and other democratic benefits. By repeatedly narrating their role in the nation making process the marginalized communities put forward a moral logic in favour of reservations and social

justice for themselves. They contend that though they had shed their blood and sweat for the building of this nation and in spite of their historical role in its development, the State has not helped them to recover from their social, cultural and economic losses. Through these narratives they assert that their role in the recorded history of nation making has not been sufficiently acknowledged and their contribution in the freedom struggle has been completely ignored (Dinkar op cit: 23). The narratives of the 1857 Revolution helped them to not only establish their own heroes, but also to dethrone the existing high-caste heroes from the mainstream narratives. In their narratives they presented the high castes as traitors, conspirators, and communities which were dishonest to their motherland. The Dalits also want to prove that these traitors, by capturing history, now appear as the most nationalist communities. They have become the most influential sections after independence (Vidrohi 1989: 86). The Dalits thus feel that there are sufficient grounds to explore *their* contribution to the freedom struggle and gain compensation in the present for it.

Dalit politicians and Dalit intellectuals are using history, memories and icons of 1857 in their discourses in various ways. First, when caste conferences are organised as an

urge for identity construction, they publish posters and handbills in which the contribution of their caste heroes in the 1857 struggle is mentioned.<sup>13</sup> Second, they justify their demands from the State as reward for their role in the 1857 movement.<sup>14</sup> Third, during election campaigns the BSP leaders highlight the contribution of those heroes of the 1857 movement who belong to the caste which they are addressing. Fourth, many castes, in their mass struggle against the prejudices harboured by the state publish posters and pamphlets in which they mention their role in the 1857 freedom struggle. Many castes are still considered criminal tribes on the basis of old colonial acts that continue to be followed by the police although they have now been abolished. Such castes say that when the upper castes were busy collaborating with the British to earn titles of Rai Bahadur and grabbing land that belonged to Dalit ancestors, they (the Dalits) were fighting against the British. In anger, the British branded them as criminal tribes under the Criminal Tribe Acts of 1871, 1896, 1901-2, 1909, 1911, 1913-4, 1919 and 1924. Although these tribes have now been denotified, whenever a criminal activity takes place, the police, acting on preconceived notions, first arrests members of these tribes (Dinkar, op. cit.). As a protest against this kind

of State atrocity, these communities organise protests and publish posters and handbills in which they mention their role in the 1857 movement.

## **Conclusion**

The Dalits of northern India have an emotional link with the 1857 War of Independence for they believe that it was initiated by them. They claim that the Soldier Revolt by the mostly Dalit Indian soldiers in the British Army that took place in Barrackpore in 1857, snowballed into the War of Independence. Although mainstream history credits Mangal Pandey with leading the revolt, they believe that it was actually a Dalit Matadin Bhangi who inspired him to revolt. The Dalit narratives of the first freedom struggle are filled with stories about brave martyrs belonging to suppressed communities who fought bravely against the British for the sake of the freedom of their motherland. These heroes are now being used by Dalit communities for proving their spirit of nationalism and their role in the freedom of the country. Through this process they are also demanding an

appropriate share in the power structure of state and society. Since the 1857 rebellion was mainly a revolt of peasants and sepoys at the people's level, most of which was undocumented and unrecorded, it provided them ample space to search for their own local heroes of this revolt and posit them alongside mainstream nationalist heroes. In some places in UP and Bihar where the revolt was mainly confined and where the lower castes still lead a marginalized existence, these heroes have been reincarnated as deities who are considered to have godly powers. These deities are worshipped by the Dalits of these regions, who pray to them to fulfill their wishes and inundate their families with prosperity. Thus the memory of the 1857 revolt is still being kept alive in the collective psyche of the Dalits which is helping to inspire them in their struggle against the social, economic and political exclusion and discrimination in their daily lives.

### **Notes**

1. Field diary, Bidesia project, GBPSSI, 2005
2. Field diary, Bidesia Project, ibid.
3. **Based on the oral interview from Deomun, age 25yrs  
Sipahi, Age 60yrs of Janidih Village, Bhojpur, Bihar,**

North India, May 5, 2004.

4. This story was narrated to me by an old woman Bhagwanti Devi of Duari located in the district Kanpur Dehat of North India on 10<sup>th</sup> January, 2007 at 12 A.M.

5. Field Trip to Kanpur as a part of project 'Myth, Memory and Politics: A Study of the Language of Mobilization of Grassroots Dalits', sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi, April, 2004.

6. Field Trip to various parts of UP while conducting research for the project Myth, Memory and Politics: A Study of the Language of Mobilization of Grassroots Dalits,' sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi, April-May, 2004.

7. Dalit Kesari, Allahabad, 14 –30 June 1990

8. Sumanshankar, *Himayati*, May 1996 issue

9. Based on story of Jhalkaribai in the novel 'Jhalkaribai', written by Bhawani Shankar Visharad. (**Visharad, B.S. 1964, Virangna Jhalkaribai, Anand Sahitya Sadan, Aligarh**)

10. *Asian Age*, Calcutta, December 24' December 31, 1995, and January 7, 1996.

11. Hindustan, Lucknow July 18, p. 3.



12. Hindustan, Lucknow July 18, P. 3
13. Pamphlets published on the occasion of Nishad, Bind, Kashyap, Lodh Ekta Sammelan, 23 February 1997, Allahabad.
14. Pamphlets of Nishad caste published during its conference for demanding their traditional rights on water and sand, 10-11 November 1979.

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