

Voices from the Shadows: Reclaiming the Legacy of Unsung Women in History with Special Reference to Rani Abbaka Chowta

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ABSTRACT

Women have long played pivotal roles in shaping societies, cultures, and histories, yet their contributions often remain unrecognized in mainstream narratives. History, shaped by power structures, often relegates women to the margins, casting their efforts in the shadows. This paper seeks to spotlight the marginalized voices of such unsung women, with a special focus on Rani Abbaka Chowta of Ullal. As a courageous and strategic leader who resisted Portuguese colonial aggression in the 16th century, Rani Abbaka symbolizes the resilience and leadership of women across historical epochs. Her story exemplifies how gendered narratives have excluded vital accounts of resistance, governance, and indigenous sovereignty. Through this paper, an attempt is made to reinsert her contributions into the broader discourse of Indian and world history. The paper also aims to highlight the socio-political structures that have historically contributed to the silencing of women's voices and proposes a framework for their historical rehabilitation.

Keywords: Rani ABBAKA, Unsung women, Indian women

INTRODUCTION

History, as traditionally written, has systematically ignored the achievements of women, particularly those from non-Western or colonized regions. The term “unsung women” refers to the multitude of female figures whose contributions were either downplayed or omitted from mainstream narratives. Rani Abbaka Chowta of Ullal is a powerful exemplar of such marginalization.

The study of history is not merely about chronicling past events—it is an exercise in memory, identity, and power. Traditionally, historical narratives have been shaped by patriarchal and colonial institutions, which prioritized male, elite, and often Eurocentric perspectives. In such a framework, women, particularly those from non-urban and indigenous backgrounds, have been systematically overlooked. This historiographical gap is not accidental but rooted in larger systems of oppression that sought to delegitimize female leadership. The reclamation of women's histories is thus a political and intellectual necessity. This paper highlights one such neglected figure, Rani Abbaka Chowta, whose life and legacy provide a compelling case study in courage, governance, and resistance. Her story invites us to reconsider the epistemology of history—who writes it, who is remembered, and who is forgotten.

The Need to Reclaim Forgotten Heroines

The marginalization of women in history is not merely an academic oversight but a reflection of systemic patriarchy that governs how societies construct and transmit knowledge. Most school curricula, national commemorations, and public discourses are male-dominated, leading to a skewed understanding of the past. The recovery of women's contributions—especially in politics, warfare, literature, and social reform—serves multiple purposes. First, it corrects historical inaccuracies by presenting a more complete picture. Second, it provides role models that inspire future generations, especially young women. Third, it fosters a more

inclusive form of national pride that recognizes diversity in leadership. Moreover, reclaiming these narratives challenges the binaries of male warrior vs. female nurturer, thereby redefining power, courage, and resistance in broader terms. Rani Abbaka Chowta is a prime example of a woman who defied these binaries through her assertive and inclusive leadership.

The Silence in Historical Narratives

The invisibility of women in historical texts is not merely an omission; it is an act of erasure rooted in patriarchy and colonial epistemologies. Scholars like Gerda Lerner and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have critiqued this “epistemic violence” which silences subaltern voices—particularly women—from the annals of official history. Women's resistance, leadership, and agency are often categorized as folklore or dismissed as regional anomalies, thus undermining their significance.

Contextual Background: Colonial Challenges in 16th Century India

The 16th century in India was a period of political flux and external threats. While various regional kingdoms struggled to maintain autonomy, European powers—most notably the Portuguese—began asserting dominance along the coastal regions. The Portuguese aimed to monopolize the spice trade and impose their cultural and religious ideologies. Their military prowess and naval superiority gave them significant leverage, particularly along India's western coast. The region of Tulu Nadu, where Rani Abbaka ruled, was strategically important due to its ports and trading hubs. Ullal, her capital, became a focal point of resistance. Rani Abbaka's opposition to the Portuguese was not merely a defensive act; it was a strategic assertion of sovereignty, economic independence, and cultural preservation. Her ability to forge coalitions with neighboring rulers and mobilize local communities showcases the political acumen and visionary leadership she embodied during a time of existential threat.

Rani Abbaka Chowta: A Forgotten Warrior Queen

Rani Abbaka Chowta was born into the Chowta dynasty, a Jain ruling family that upheld matrilineal traditions, allowing women significant roles in governance. Her early education included rigorous training in warfare, statecraft, and diplomacy. Upon ascending the throne of Ullal, she inherited not just political power but a responsibility to defend her people and territory. Her reign is marked by repeated military confrontations with the Portuguese, whom she resisted fiercely. She employed guerrilla tactics, exploited her knowledge of the terrain, and maintained a multi-ethnic and multi-religious army. Her refusal to pay tribute to the Portuguese was both an economic and symbolic act of resistance.

Abbakka's leadership extended beyond the battlefield. She is remembered for her administrative acumen, commitment to social justice, and efforts to unify her subjects. Despite personal betrayals, including from her estranged husband, she remained steadfast in her commitment to independence. Captured after several battles, Abbakka's continued resistance—according to oral traditions—made her a living symbol of defiance and resilience. Her legacy is preserved in regional folklore, ballads, and the annual Veera Rani Abbakka Utsava held in her honor.

Symbolism and Legacy

Rani Abbaka's life and resistance embody multiple layers of symbolism. First, she is a symbol of communal harmony; her army included Hindus, Muslims, and Jains—a unity that was rare during her time. This inclusive model of leadership offers a counter-narrative to divisive identities. Second, she represents feminine leadership that defies traditional gender roles. In a time when most women were relegated to domestic spheres, Abbakka led armies and administered justice with wisdom and courage. Third, her defiance of colonial aggression makes her an early figure in the anti-imperial struggle—predating even the more famous 1857 revolt.

Despite these profound contributions, Abbaka remains largely absent from mainstream Indian historiography. Her legacy is kept alive through oral traditions, Yakshagana performances, and local commemorations rather than formal education systems. This disconnect highlights the need for academic interventions that document, disseminate, and discuss such figures in national and global contexts.

Historical Silence: Factors Behind the Marginalization

The erasure of Rani Abbaka and many like her from history can be attributed to multiple intersecting factors. Colonial historians often dismissed indigenous resistance as disorganized or primitive, thereby excluding leaders like Abbaka from formal narratives. Additionally, patriarchal norms devalued female leadership, preferring to focus on kings, generals, and male revolutionaries. Oral traditions, which preserved her legacy, were not considered legitimate sources by early historians. Furthermore, the lack of written records in European languages contributed to the neglect of regional heroines.

The issue is compounded by post-independence historiography, which focused on pan-Indian nationalist leaders at the expense of regional and local figures. This has created a historical vacuum where female voices are not only unheard but actively suppressed. It is crucial for contemporary scholars to challenge these silences and adopt interdisciplinary approaches that validate oral histories, regional literature, and folk traditions as authentic historical sources.

Gender and Leadership in Colonial Contexts

Abbaka's resistance challenges stereotypical gender norms of the time. In the 16th-century Indian socio-political landscape, women were often restricted to domestic spheres. Rani Abbaka broke these confines, ruling independently, commanding armies, and forming military strategies. Her story becomes more remarkable when juxtaposed with the colonial portrayal of Indian women as passive and oppressed—a trope often used to justify colonial rule. Abbaka not only resisted foreign domination but also undermined this imperial narrative by embodying agency and leadership.

Contemporary Relevance

In today's context of global feminist movements and decolonization efforts, the story of Rani Abbaka holds immense relevance. She exemplifies how local resistance can have far-reaching implications. Her leadership style—decentralized, inclusive, and community-driven—provides a compelling model for modern governance. In an era when gender equity and historical justice are major concerns, revisiting Abbaka's life offers not just inspiration but a blueprint for action.

Her legacy encourages academic institutions to diversify curricula, policymakers to recognize local heroes, and civil society to document and preserve oral traditions. She serves as a reminder that history is not static but a living dialogue—one that must include all voices, especially those that have been marginalized. In celebrating Abbaka, we also assert the relevance of inclusive and pluralistic histories in building a more just and equitable society.

Comparative Reflections: Other Unsung Heroines

Rani Abbaka's story resonates with other forgotten heroines like Rani Durgavati of Gondwana, Kittur Rani Chennamma, and Velu Nachiyar of Tamil Nadu. These women shared common traits of resistance, strategic acumen, and a deep connection with their people. Their marginalization highlights a systemic pattern of gendered silencing in historical documentation, which needs to be urgently addressed through inclusive scholarship.

CONCLUSION

Rani Abbaka Chowta stands as a towering yet underrecognized figure in Indian history. Her defiance against colonial forces, inclusive governance, and unwavering courage position her as a precursor to modern ideas of

resistance and justice. Reclaiming her narrative is an act of historical justice and a necessary step toward inclusive historiography. As we move toward a more equitable society, it is imperative that we recognize and honor such voices from the shadows. Their stories not only enrich our understanding of the past but also guide our visions for the future.

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