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Rani Abbakka Chowta of Ullal: The Unsung Brave Warrior Queen

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Abstract:

This article examines the life, leadership, and courageous resistance of Rani Abbakka Chowta of Ullal against Portuguese colonial expansion during the sixteenth century. It highlights her early life, military training, administrative abilities, and significant contributions to protecting the sovereignty of her kingdom. The study explores her strategic alliances with neighbouring rulers and the participation of people from different religious and social communities in her army. It also discusses her remarkable naval and military battles against the Portuguese and her determination to defend her motherland despite betrayal and imprisonment. The article emphasizes Rani Abbakka's historical significance as a symbol of women's courage, patriotism, resistance to colonialism, and the preservation of regional cultural heritage.

Keywords: *Rani Abbakka Chowta, Portuguese Colonialism, Ullal Kingdom, Women's Leadership, Freedom Struggle.*

Introduction

Ullal is an important educational, commercial, and industrial centre located in the Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, approximately 10 kilometres from the centre of Mangaluru city. It served as a subsidiary capital of the Chowta rulers and was governed by Rani Abbakka Chowta, a Jain queen, during the sixteenth century. Ullal is one of the historically significant towns of coastal Karnataka. Its glorious past is reflected in its historical sites, beaches, and cultural traditions.

Rani Abbakka Chowta

Rani Abbakka was the first Tuluva queen of Ullal who fought against the Portuguese during the latter half of the sixteenth century. She belonged to the Chowta dynasty, which ruled over the coastal regions of Karnataka, popularly known as Tulu Nadu. The capital of the Chowta kingdom was Puttige, while the port town of Ullal served as its subsidiary capital.

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Because of its strategic geographical location and flourishing maritime trade, the Portuguese made several attempts to capture Ullal. However, Abbakka successfully resisted their attacks for several decades. Her bravery earned her the title of Abhava Rani, meaning the fearless queen. She is remembered as one of the earliest Indian rulers to resist European colonial expansion. In Karnataka, she is celebrated alongside Kittur Rani Chennamma, Keladi Chennamma, Rani Chennabhairadevi, and Onake Obavva as one of the prominent women warriors and patriots.

Early Life of Abbakka

From an early age, Rani Abbakka Chowta received training in administration, warfare, military strategies, archery, diplomacy, and other essential aspects of governance. The Chowtas followed the matrilineal inheritance system known as Aliyasantana, practised among the Digambara Jain Bunt community. According to this tradition, Tirumala Raya, Abbakka's uncle, crowned her the queen of Ullal. He also arranged her marriage with Lakshmappa Arasa Bangaraja II, the ruler of the Banga principality in Mangaluru. This matrimonial alliance later became a source of conflict with the Portuguese. However, the marriage was short-lived, and Abbakka returned to Ullal. Her estranged husband subsequently sought revenge against her and joined the Portuguese in their conflict with Abbakka.

She ruled over a kingdom inhabited by people belonging to different religious communities, particularly Hindus, Muslims, and Jains. Although she was a Jain, her administration included people from various religious backgrounds. The diversity of her army was one of its greatest strengths. Muslim fishermen, including members of the Mogaveera and Beary communities, contributed significantly to her naval forces and maritime battles against the Portuguese.

Portuguese Expansion and Ullal

Since the seventh century CE, maritime trade in spices, textiles, horses, and other commodities had flourished between the western coast of India and the Arabian Peninsula. Several European countries attempted to discover new sea routes to India to gain control over this lucrative trade. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a direct sea route to India when Vasco da Gama reached Calicut in 1498. Subsequently, they established trading centres and forts in different parts of the Indian Ocean region, including India, Muscat, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and Macau in China. With their superior naval technology, the Portuguese gradually established control over important maritime trade routes. They introduced a permit system known as Cartaz, under which trading vessels were required to obtain permission from them to conduct maritime trade.

The kingdom of Rani Abbakka was situated along the western coast of India and attracted Portuguese attention because of its strategic location and commercial importance. Ullal was a fertile region and an important port for the export of spices and textiles. The Portuguese attempted to bring the region under their control and demanded tribute from the queen. However, Rani Abbakka firmly rejected their demands and continued to maintain trade relations with Arab merchants. Despite repeated threats and military attacks, she refused to surrender her kingdom. Her determination and military intelligence enabled her to defeat the Portuguese in their initial attempts to capture Ullal.

Military Alliances and Administration

Rani Abbakka's army and administration consisted of people belonging to Jain, Hindu, and Muslim communities. Historical accounts also indicate that Beary Muslim sailors served in her naval forces. Her army represented different communities and social groups, reflecting her inclusive approach to administration. She established strategic alliances with neighbouring rulers, including the Zamorin of Calicut. These alliances strengthened her resistance against Portuguese expansion. Her matrimonial relationship with the Banga dynasty also contributed to the political and military alliances of the region. She further received support from powerful rulers such as Venkatappa Nayaka of Bidnur. Through these alliances and her administrative capabilities, she strengthened the defence of Ullal and challenged Portuguese dominance along the coastal region.

Battles Against the Portuguese

The Portuguese were dissatisfied with Abbakka's resistance and demanded that she pay them tribute. However, she refused to submit to their demands. In 1555, the Portuguese sent Admiral Dom Álvaro da Silveira to fight against her following her refusal to pay tribute. In the battle that followed, Rani Abbakka successfully resisted the Portuguese attack. In 1557, the Portuguese plundered Mangaluru and subsequently turned their attention towards Ullal in 1568. Abbakka once again demonstrated her military courage and strategic abilities. The Portuguese Viceroy António Noronha sent General João Peixoto and a large contingent of soldiers to capture Ullal. They managed to enter the city and reach the royal court. However, Rani Abbakka escaped and took refuge in a mosque.

That same night, she gathered approximately 200 soldiers and launched a surprise attack against the Portuguese forces. During the battle, General Peixoto was killed, around seventy Portuguese soldiers were captured, and several others were forced to retreat. In subsequent military encounters, Abbakka and her supporters continued their resistance. They also attacked Portuguese positions and challenged their control over Mangaluru Fort.

The Portuguese subsequently captured Mangaluru Fort and Kundapura (Basrur). Despite these developments, Abbakka continued to pose a serious threat to Portuguese authority. With the assistance of her estranged husband, the Portuguese launched further attacks against Ullal. In 1570, Abbakka formed an alliance with the Bijapur Sultan and the Zamorin of Calicut, who were also opposed to Portuguese expansion. On one occasion, while returning from a visit to her family temple, she was taken by surprise by the Portuguese forces. Nevertheless, she immediately mounted her horse and led her soldiers into battle. Her determination and inspiring battle cry encouraged her soldiers to continue fighting on land and sea. They launched attacks against Portuguese ships using flaming arrows and other weapons.

During these fierce battles, Kutty Pokar Markar, the Zamorin's general, fought on behalf of Abbakka and destroyed the Portuguese fort at Mangaluru. However, he was subsequently killed by the Portuguese while returning. Although several Portuguese ships were destroyed, Abbakka was wounded during the conflict. With the assistance of certain local chieftains who had betrayed her, the Portuguese eventually captured her. She was imprisoned, but even in prison, she continued to resist her captors and died fighting for her freedom.

Conclusion

Rani Abbakka Chowta occupies a significant place in the history of Karnataka as a courageous warrior queen who resisted Portuguese colonial expansion. Her military strategies, administrative abilities, diplomatic relations, and determination to protect her kingdom demonstrate her exceptional leadership. Her legacy continued through her daughters, who also resisted Portuguese domination and defended Tulu Nadu. Although her contribution has not received sufficient recognition in mainstream historical narratives, she remains an inspiring figure in the cultural memory of coastal Karnataka. Her life and achievements are remembered through local folk traditions, particularly Bhuta Kola and Yakshagana. In recent years, public awareness of her contributions has increased through the celebration of Veera Rani Abbakka Utsava in Dakshina Kannada. Rani Abbakka's life stands as an enduring example of women's courage, patriotism, religious harmony, and resistance to colonial oppression. Her contribution deserves greater recognition in Indian history.

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