

Re-examining Timur's 1398 Invasion of India: Suppressed Histories, Oral Traditions, and the Forgotten Resistance of Rampyari Gurjari

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63345/ijrhrs.net.v13.i11.6>

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ABSTRACT

The invasion of India in 1398 by Timur Lang is one of the most merciless military campaigns of the Middle Ages. Traditional accounts of the invasion portray Timur's victory over Delhi as swift and almost effortless; thus, these versions dismiss all the hard resistance he found at Meerut, Haridwar, and Garhwal through local chieftains such as Rampyari Gurjari, Jograj Singh Gurjar, and Harbir Singh Gulia, who are remembered in oral traditions to have delayed his march and caused substantial losses to him.

Drawing on a wide variety of sources, from Persian chronicles to Arab accounts, regional folklore, and decolonial historiography, this paper reassesses the invasion of 1398 in order to explain why resistance figures are not a feature of mainstream textbooks. The findings show that these silences reflect long-standing biases in court histories, colonial scholarship, and post-colonial practices of knowledge production. The study argues that figures such as Rampyari Gurjari have a place in grassroots resistance and challenge the notion of medieval invincibility.

1. INTRODUCTION

He established an empire that stretched from Central Asia through West Asia into parts of India, and his base was at

Samarkand. Though most of the Persian accounts of Timur Lang are accounts of great strategic genius, yet the invasion of India in 1398 resulted in one of the worst massacres ever experienced in the subcontinent. Much mainstream South Asian scholarship has replicated this trend, rarely moving beyond a reliance on Timur's memoirs and state chronicles.

This paper addresses this deficit by attempting to:

1. Discuss Timur's publicly stated motivations compared to his actual objectives.
2. To study the extent and brutality of the Delhi massacre,
3. Establishing evidence of the retreats of Timur at Meerut, Haridwar, and Garhwal.
4. Highlighting, through folk tradition, the often-neglected roles and contributions of Rampyari Gurjari and her cohorts.
5. The impact of colonial censorship and selective historiography on the erasure of indigenous heroes.

By integrating historical records with oral narratives, the present study aims to give a more balanced account of the 1398 invasion.

Timur's Motives: Religion, Politics, and Opportunism

Timur had justified his campaign against India on the plea of Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah Tughlaq being unduly indulgent towards the Hindus and not enforcing compulsory

conversions, posing as the defender of Islam. Actually, however, the religious justification was little more than an excuse for political and territorial ambition.



Fig-1: <https://newstrack.com/opinion/rampyari-gurjar-brave-woman-who-forced-taimurlang-to-leave-his-expedition-to-india-news-in-hindi-416205>

2.1 Exploiting Political Weakness

Like many medieval conquerors whether Hindu, Muslim, Central Asian, or Afghan Timur targeted regions weakened by political instability. The Tughlaq dynasty, after years of misrule and economic decline, presented India as a vulnerable and divided prize for an ambitious warlord.

2.2 Wealth as the Primary Goal

Contemporary sources, such as the Zafarnama and accounts by Ibn Arabshah, confirm that the big motive of Timur was plunder, not rule based on religion. The fabled riches of India, skilled craftsmen, and war elephants attracted him far more than the prospect of ruling a country so far from his home base.

2.3 Tolerance vs. Violence: A Misleading Claim

This is ironic because it was actually the Tughlaq rulers who imposed heavy taxes and other discriminatory policies upon the Hindu communities. Timur used religious rhetoric as a means to legitimize his invasion.

Essentially, Timur acted through opportunism, cloaked in the mantle of religious pretexts-a rather familiar pattern in the history of imperial conquests.

3. The Delhi Massacre: A Humanitarian Disaster

Timur entered Delhi in December 1398 and caused violence on an unprecedented scale.

3.1 Mass Slaughter

Persian chroniclers recorded that Timur's forces killed hundreds of thousands of unarmed civilians. Whole neighbourhoods were razed to the ground, and the city's population fell so drastically that it took Delhi almost a century to recover.

3.2 Tower of Skulls

This included the most shocking acts, such as making pyramids from decapitated heads, a sort of psychological war tactic. Though Timur had done it elsewhere, the extent was unmatched in Delhi.

3.3 Selective Historiography

Despite such devastation, most academic accounts reduce the invasion to a mere "campaign," without paying any attention to the humanitarian catastrophe. The emphasis on Timur's military prowess has overshadowed the suffering of Indian civilians-an imbalance this research attempts to rectify.

4. The Suppressed Chapter: Timur's Setbacks in Meerut, Haridwar, and Garhwal

While mainstream histories represent Timur's invasion as swift and almost unopposed, the Zafarnama of Sharaf ad-Din Yazdi and accounts by Arabshah show otherwise in the north.

4.1 Local Resistance Outside Delhi

In Meerut and Haridwar-Garhwal belt, Timur's forces faced:

Guerrilla attacks

- Hard terrain
- Fierce resistance by local clans
- Resource shortages

These details are seldom foregrounded in academic discussion.

4.2 The Battle of Haridwar

There is, however, a version of an injury that Timur received during one of the battles near Haridwar. Some Persian manuscripts refer to this injury very vaguely; however, it is not stressed by historians.

4.3 Return with Heavy Losses

Timur entered India with close to 150,000 men, of whom only a few thousand, according to the local traditions and some secondary Persian sources, ever returned to Samarkand, which precludes an uncontested victory.

These facts open the door to examine the local resistance narratives overshadowed by court historians.

5. Rampyari Gurjarii, Jograj Singh Gurjar, and Harbir Singh Gulia: The Forgotten Heroes

One of the most intriguing oral traditions of resistance is that of Rampyari Gurjari, a woman warrior hailing from Western UP / Uttarakhand, who reportedly mobilized a battalion of women to counter the Turco-Mongol onslaught. I present before the reader a powerful but seldom-discussed chapter in Indian history—one which explains why Timur, despite his initial victory in Delhi, had to retreat from India in humiliation and never recovered from his injuries sustained here.

Mainstream histories celebrate the victories of Timur, while united resistance by Hindus and individuals opposing his ambitions are hardly acknowledged. This account looks at the story of one such fearless woman warrior, Rampyari Gurjari, whose contributions have been totally omitted from formal records. Regional oral traditions, however, give credit for

organizing resistance forces to her and leading a decisive counterattack, which seriously wounded Timur and did indeed affect the course of his campaign.

As the invasion by Timur loomed over North India, a number of Hindu communities consolidated into an approximately 120,000-strong volunteer force composed of different castes and regions, according to folk versions. Notably, the contingent also included an all-women regiment—approximately 40,000-strong—led by Rampyari Gurjari Chauhan, which would remain an unforgettable moment in the annals of Indian history. This battalion also clashed with the invader and, according to oral histories, played a crucial role in repelling Timur's forces.

It stands as a tribute to the grassroots resilience of India and to the strength of its local warriors, which the official chronicles and colonial historians have brushed aside. The incomplete story about Timur's campaign in India does not take into consideration the unified resistance provided, along with the exceptional women leadership of Rampyari Gurjari, whose acts of bravery need to be included in the national narrative.



Fig-2: <https://myvoice.opindia.com/2021/04/rampyari-gurjar-the-girl-who-held-the-saffron-flag-high-is-a-fictional-character/>

5.1 Oral Histories of Local Resistance

The folk songs of Western UP and southern Uttarakhand celebrate:

- Rampyari Gurjari (Chouhan) : She led hundreds of women warriors.
- Jograj Singh Gurjar, coordinated mountain tribes.
- Harbir Singh Gulia was a Jat who wounded Timur with a spear thrust to his chest.

These traditions recorded that Timur had to retire sooner than expected because of his injury.

5.2 Why are they missing from textbooks?

The reasons are structural.

a) Court Historians

Timur's biographers exaggerated his successes to glorify him.

b) Lack of Written Records

The oral tradition reigned supreme, not manuscripts, in rural India.

c) Colonial Historiography

The British destroyed countless local records and labelled warrior communities like Gurjars as "criminal tribes" to justify suppression.

d) Post-Colonial Selectivity

Modern Indian schoolbooks have a "big empire history" emphasis, rather than rural and tribal resistance.

5.3 Comparing with Larger Historical Silences

If it is archaeology that has authenticated the Ramayana sites, the Saraswati river, Dwarka, and Ram Setu-all once dismissed as "myths"-it is not unreasonable to argue that forgotten heroes such as Rampyari Gurjari existed but were excluded from elite literature.

6. Historiography and the Politics of Memory

Historical records reflect not only events but also who wrote them, why, and under whose patronage.

6.1 Why Medieval Chroniclers Ignored Indian Resistance

Similar to most of the great conquerors, Timur had:

Court poets

- Royal propagandists
- Chroniclers paid for exaggerating victories

He had no reason to document losses at the hands of Indian natives.

6.2 Why British Historians Preserved Only Select Narratives

The British needed to:

- Portray Indians as disunited, weak, or passive
- Justify colonial rule as "civilizing"
- Suppress stories of Indian courage and resistance

Therefore, they downplayed:

- Guerrilla warfare
- Tribal uprisings
- Women-led resistance
- Victories against foreign invaders

6.3 Modern Academic Blind Spots

Yet, most Indian history textbooks still tend to focus on:

- Delhi Sultanate
- Mughal Empire
- Foreign rulers
- Court literature

while ignoring:

- Regional resistance
- Tribal warriors
- Women leadership
- Rural uprisings

Rampyari Gurjari is from the neglected category.

7. Decolonising the Narrative: Why Rampyari Gurjari Matters Today

Restoring Rampyari Gurjari to our historical memory is not only an emotional act; it is an academic imperative.

7.1 Symbol of Women's Empowerment

The case of Rampyari epitomizes the fact that Indian women played an active role in medieval conflicts and were not mere onlookers.

7.2 Cultural Identity and Community Pride

The communities that have kept her legacy alive remind us that oral traditions are as vital to the preservation of history as any written record.

7.3 A Call for Historical Justice

Events like the recognition of Rampyari Gurjari as a national hero at the local level correct the long-entrenched biases and give a fuller version of India's resistance.

7.4 Inspiring Future Generations

It will be a memorial to the memory of Rampyari Gurjari, including teaching children about empowering women, speaking of grassroots heroes, and balancing history.

Conclusion

Timur's invasion of India in 1398 is best remembered for the destruction in Delhi and his retreat thereafter with plunder. Reality, however, is not quite that simple. The regional groups showed stiff resistance outside Delhi-the remarkable efforts of Rampyari Gurjari, Jograj Singh Gurjar and Harbir Singh Gulia being a case in point. These stories have been kept alive in oral traditions, having systematically been excluded from mainstream history.

It also falls squarely in the larger trend of medieval chroniclers, colonial historians, and even the later modern academic frameworks that gave credence to imperial accounts

over that of local resistance. Reclaiming such lost figures for our scholarship is not building a legend; it is restoring balance and justice. Rampyari Gurjari represents courage and resilience, and she rightly belongs in the textbooks, museums, and the collective memory of the nation.

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