

# Raniluxmi Bai : A Warrior's Death

## Abstract

Sir Hugh Rose who had laid down the command after the capture of Kalpi got no respite. He left Kalpi on June 06, 1858 for Gwalior. He planned to invest it as closely as possible and then to attack it on its weakest side in order to check the retreat of the revolutionaries. The weakest side of Gwalior was the eastern one. Accordingly, Colonel Riddell was instructed to march down the Agra road and Brigadier Smith to proceed to Kota-Ki-Seria, about four miles south-east of Gwalior. In order to gain the favor of the general masses, Sindhia was also invited to proceed to Gwalior from Agra. On June 16, 1858 Sir Hugh Rose's column arrived near Morar Cantonment. The revolutionaries had collected a large army to oppose him. As the British force advanced, their battery, infantry as well as the artillery opened fire. The British army pressed on in spite of heavy firing and Morar was lost to the revolutionaries. General Smith's Brigade opened an attack on the revolutionaries on the next day, June 17, 1858 on the hilly ground between Kota-Ki-Serai and Gwalior, and after a severe contest forced them to retreat. In this action Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi died fighting. "About 8 A.M the combatants met at the canal, about noon the Europeans advanced, the Jhansi Rani was Killed on the Campoo, the battle lasted till evening in which the rebels fired many volleys and the Europeans went up the hills. The rebels returned having burnt the corpses of the Jhansi Rani and another women (Moondir) who had fallen with her."

**Keywords:** Mutiness, revolutionaries, dispatches, Sardar, Palkee, Har - Har Mahadeva, Sadhu.

## Introduction

Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi gave a valiant fight to the British Forces to defend her independence. While she was at Gwalior with her forces during her campaign, Sir Hugh Rose was at Kalpi after capturing the town. He rushed to Gwalior on June 6, 1858. He planned to invest it as closely as possible and then to attack it on its weakest side in order to check the retreat of the revolutionaries. The weakest side of Gwalior was the eastern one. Accordingly, Colonel Riddell was instructed to march down the Agra road and Brigadier Smith to proceed to Kota-Ki-Seria, about four miles south-east of Gwalior. In order to gain the favor of the general masses, Sindhia was also invited to proceed to Gwalior from Agra. On June 16, 1858 Sir Hugh Rose's column arrived near Morar Cantonment. The revolutionaries had collected a large army to oppose him. As the British force advanced, their battery, infantry as well as the artillery opened fire. The British army pressed on in spite of heavy firing and Morar was lost to the revolutionaries. General Smith's Brigade opened an attack on the revolutionaries on the next day, June 17, 1858 on the hilly ground between Kota-Ki-Serai and Gwalior, and after a severe contest forced them to retreat. In this action Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi died fighting. Various accounts are attributed as her last fight and heroic death, a critical study of which is attended in this paper.

## Aim of the Study

This study aims at a critical my labour amply rewarded if this monograph could evince greater interest in the admirers of the Rani and the scholars of history.

## Review of Literature

Rani Laxmi Bai was one of the great fighters for independence against the domination of the government of East India Company. There is no dearth of original and secondary sources of this great even of 1857. However a detailed study of the life and role of the great warrior Rani Laxmi Bai has also been made by various writers. We also derive a lot of information from the Pre-mutiny and mutiny records preserved by the British government which are available in the State Archives of U.P. later, several volumes were published by the U.P. government on the

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contribution of Uttar on the Freedom struggle. Source Material volume I (1957) and volume III (1959) edited by S A A Rizvi and M L Bhargava have useful references to the role of Rani Laxmi Bai. Moreover, we have some other published works at our disposal Like V.D. Sawarkar- 'Indian War of Independence', V. Godse's- 'Manjha Prawas' in Marathi and translated in Hindi by A. L. Nagar titled- 'Ankho Dekha Gadar'. Maharani Laxmi Bai Saheb Havanche Charitra by D.B. Parsanis Translated in Hindi. 'Jhansi Ki Rani Laxmi Bai' is directly related to the life of the Rani.

The sensational news about the fall of Gwalior into the hands of the revolutionaries came into the British Camp as a bolt from the blue. It caught them unawares. The British authorities were alarmed that the revolutionaries after obtaining such a prized victory might not proceed to Deccan after leaving a garrison at Gwalior and intercept the communications between Bombay and the North-Western Provinces by cutting the telegraph lines traversing Sindhiya's territory. The rainy season was to commence soon and so the entire country in the neighborhood of Gwalior would be quite impassable for troops. The restoration of their faithful ally Jayaji Rao Sindhia to his ancestral dominions was a matter of great prestige for them. Besides, the extinction of revolutionary leaders like the Rani of Jhansi, Tatya Tope and Rao Sahebe etc. who were there, was also essential to extinguish the fire of the revolt which had not yet subsided.

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The death of Rani broke the heart of the revolutionaries. The final battle was fought on June 19, 1858 which lasted five hours and a half

and ultimately the British were victorious<sup>5</sup>. On the next day the fort was captured and the Maharaja was escorted back to his palace Rao Saheb Tatya Tope and the Nawab of Banda had already left the palace. Lord Canning, the Governor General lost no time in issuing a proclamation announcing the capture of the town and fort of Gwalior<sup>6</sup>.

Different versions have been given about the death of Rani, Major S. Charters Macpherson, political agent at Gwalior wrote: "Near the phoolbagh batteries, I may observe, fell the Rani of Jhansi. She was seated, says her servant, drinking sherbet, 400 of the 5<sup>th</sup> Irregulars near her, when the alarm was given that the Hussars approached. Forty or fifty of them came up, and the rebels fled, save about fifteen. The Rani's horse refused to leap the canal, when she received a shot in the side, and then a sabre cut on the head but rode off. She soon after fell dead, and was burnt in a garden close by"<sup>7</sup>.

Hamilton Agent to the Governor General Central India gave a somewhat different version. He stated: "There is a matter connected with the manner in which the Jhansi Rani was killed which is not in accordance with the result of my enquiries at the time and on spot. The fact that the Rani had been killed was not known in Brigadier Smith's camp until he heard of it by a note from me. It occurred from all I could ascertain whilst the Rani with a group in which were the Rao Saheb and Tantia were looking at the advance on the heights early in the day.

Mrs Henry Duberly in a contemporary work of the period observes that the Rani was run through the body by a private of the 8<sup>th</sup>. Hussars, who as she was dressed as a man in white turban and crimson tunic and trousers, had no idea that his sword was pointed at the breast of a woman<sup>9</sup>.

She further states, "Sir Hugh Rose told me that although mortally wounded she (the Rani) was not actually killed on the field, but was carried off the ground, and ordered a funeral pile to be built which she ascended and fired with her own hand"<sup>9</sup>. Bhawani Prashad, the Agent of the Begam of Bhopal and attached to the camp of Sir Robert

Hamilton in his dispatch of June 18, 1858 from Morar Cantonment informed Nawab Sikandar Jahan Begam thus: "Yesterday the Rani of Jhansi and the Nawab of Banda both present at the entrenchment were personally directing the bombardment against Major R (Hugh Rose's?) position. During the engagement that ensued one shell from Major R's (?) battery blew off an arm of the Nawab of Banda and another one went off bruising the Rani's breast which resulted in her death. The mutineers, therefore, cremated the said Rani's body with sandal wood"<sup>11</sup>.

Two representatives of the Maharaja of Indore in Sir Robert Hamilton's camp have also thrown light on this subject in their dispatches to their ruler. Ram Chandra Vinayak wrote: "Jhansiwali Bai was killed in battle on 17<sup>th</sup> June. It happened like this: at the time of the engagement the lady was present on the battle field where she received a sabre blow which killed her. All people called her bravest

fighter."<sup>12</sup> The other representative, Hari Triyambak intimated that the battle of Gwalior lasted for four days and "the Rani of Jhansi was killed on the second day of the action .At the time of her death she used her sword to the utmost (she fought with her sword valiantly)and later she was cremated"<sup>13</sup>.

During his trial, Tatya Tope in his deposition states: "...some days after the English army arrived at Gwalior from Kalpi ,and a force also came from Sirpur (Sipri or Sheopur). Fighting again took place and continued for four or five days, during which the Rani of Jhansi was killed. Ram Rao Govind had her corps burnt....."<sup>14</sup>

Shrimati Yamuna Sheorey, grand daughter of the late Chintaman Rao Tambe, brother of the Rani gives the following account of the Rani's last fight and subsequent death: "June18,1858 dawned. It was a hot day and the Rani took a cup of lemon juice. She had already donned her red soldier's attire. And so did her men and women soldiers. And the bombardment from the British cannon began. The Rani immediately mounted her steed and plunged into the battle field The British Generals were aghast at her daring.

"Suddenly, the bayonet of a white soldier pierced the lower side of her chest and blood gushed out from her body. She turned round like a wounded lioness and finished the attacker. She saw her dear maid and friend Mundar Bai falling dead by the bullet of another soldier. She struck him by the sword with free force and cut him into two. Another soldier's bullet hit the Rani in the left thigh. She dropped the sword from her left hand to press the wound and with her right hand she hit the assailant who collapsed on the spot. Now only three or four soldiers remained around her. One of them struck the Rani on the head with his sword. The right side of her head was cut and her right eye bulged out bleeding. Still she hit back the soldier and cut out his shoulder. His faithful Pathan Sardar Gul Mohammad, pounced on the soldier and cut him into pieces and then he turned towards the remaining soldiers with the same murderous intent who then fled away for safety.

Her followers carried her bleeding to the hut of Baba Ganga Das. The Sadhu recognized her and put the holy Gang Water in her mouth. She was heard to mutter "Har Har Mahadeo" and became unconscious. After a while she regained consciousness and whispered "Om Namo Bhagwate Vasudevaya" between her pale lips and passed away into eternal sleep.

"The Sadhu consoled the bitterly weeping sardars. A funeral was hurriedly made up of dry grass. Dust went into dust. She that her body should not fall into British hands was fulfilled"<sup>15</sup>.

The Rani died a soldier's death in the battle field. The three Indians, whose accounts have been given above, agree on this point."Macpherson's account is nearer the truth in that he states the Rani's death was caused by a shot from the Hussars. But he gives the unfortunate impression that she was killed while trying to run away from the field"<sup>16</sup>." Brigadier Smith's as well as evidence collected by Captain Heneage prove that the Rani died in the battle field. Brigadier Smith in his report dated July 25,1858

stated that in the charge made by a Squadron of the 8<sup>th</sup> Hussars on June17,1858 they "took five guns, cutting down the Gunners, the Rani of Jhansi also lost her life in the melee"<sup>17</sup>." In the statement and evidence collected by Captain Heneage, it is recorded that "many of them (revolutionaries) made a stand, but the 8<sup>th</sup> (Hussars) slackened their pace and dashing into the midst of them cut them down by scores, the Rani of Jhansi being amongst the slain"<sup>18</sup>."Sir Robert Hamilton's version of the death of the Rani has been dismissed as pure imagination on his part by Tahmankar. He remarks that "once Tatya Tope assigned the defense of Phool Baug sector to the Rani on 16<sup>th</sup> June, there is no record of her meeting Tope or Rao Saheb. This does not mean that there was no communication between her and them ..... There was neither occasion nor time for them to meet together and observe the advanced of General Rose's army ....As the Rani was never in company with the other two leaders, the story of her being killed by a bullet while watching the British advance and the consequent description of her funeral procession in a 'Palkee' must be dismissed as pure imagination on the part of Hamilton and his informants"<sup>19</sup>.

#### Conclusion

It is generally agreed that Rani Laxmi Bai and fought gallantly till her last breath and died on the battlefield. Like a brave soldier. The Accounts of the last encounter with the British military as given by Bhawani Prashad, Ram Chandra Vinayake, Hari Triyambkar are much nearer the one given by Machphessor Shrimati Yamuna Sheorey has vividly described the last moments of the death of this bravest of all the freedom fighters.

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