

The Immortal Rani Lakshmi Bai

Abstract

Rani Lakshmi was a born leader and a capable commander. Besides being a skilled horse rider, she was remarkably adept in swordsmanship. The Rani was also a good shooter. She hardly missed her target. She was courageous and dauntless. She never lose hope; on the contrary she was a source of great inspiration for her troops. In the battle fields, she was always in the vanguard. Rani Lakshmi Bai was an able administrator gifted with an astounding organizing capacity. Even the British authorities acknowledged her extraordinary capability. During the course of the revolt, when the British rule was almost extinct in Jhansi Major Erskine, the commissioner of Sagar and Narbada Territories had no hesitation in intrusting the management of the district to her. Being dissatisfied with the attitude of the British Government, the Rani had to set up her own 'independent government' at Jhansi, which she managed very capably.

Keywords: Motherland, revolt, Manikarnika, Chhabili, Brave, Sword, Puranas, Ganga water, ties, Chanderi Sari, Sadhu, Har-Har Mahadeva, Om Namoh Bhagwate Vasudevay

Introduction

Manikarnika or Manu, who after her betrothal, was given the name of Rani Lakshmi Bai, was the daughter of Moropant Tambe. She was born in 1827. Lakshmi Bai lost her mother when she was only four years old and as such the responsibility of bringing her up devolved on her father. They were much older to her in age, she moved about freely in their company and learnt horse riding, shooting, fencing as well as reading and writing. Owing to her charms and noble traits she was nicknamed 'Chhabili'. Lakshmi Bai was married to Raja Gangadhar Rao of Jhansi in 1842, whose first wife Rama Bai had already died. The Rani gave birth to a son in 1851 to the great rejoicings of the people of Jhansi; but this happiness lasted for three months only, as the child could not survive. The Raja Gangadhar Rao was so much shocked and shattered by this tragedy that he fell ill never to recover again.

Aim of the Study

This study presented is objective and the controversial aspects of her personality have been analyzed dispassionately which makes it all the more useful.

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 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- 'Ankha 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.

After the annexation of her state (Jhansi) to the British Empire, the helpless Rani reconciled herself to her lot. She moved out from the royal place in Jhansi fort into her residence in the city and began to lead a simple and pious life devoting most of her time to religious worship and charity. But her measure after another which further wounded her feelings, and to her profound grief, her protests and, requests were turned down.



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In spite of the fact that the Rani was the legal guardian of the adopted son, she was asked by the British officials to furnish security and execute a written bond for the upkeep of the personal property of the late Raja in trust.¹ She declined to receive the property on such terms, rather deemed it derogatory to her rank to ask any banker to stand surety for her. The Governor General finally decided that the property be made over to the Rani upon her simple receipt, "it being understood that in her capacity of guardian she will be responsible for the debts of the state, so far as the assets go."² But Captain A. Skene, the superintendent held that the balance of the debt still due be defrayed by a deduction from the pension of the Rani if she did not pay them of the Rani if she did not pay them immediately.³ The author of 'Manjha Pravas' states that the British Government stopped the pension of the Rani after some time the connection with the payment of these debts of her late husband.⁴

Rani Lakshmi Bai occupies a very prominent place only among the leaders of the Revolt of 1857, but also among those who have sacrificed their life for the freedom of their country. Bold and brave she, like Chand Bibi and Durgawati, laid down her life for the cause of her motherland, and like them again she is enshrined in the hearts of her countrymen for her chivalrous deeds and noble sacrifice. The Rani has every claim to be called the Joan of Arc of India Boadicea. Contemporary accounts portray Rani Lakshmi Bai as a fair and beautiful woman in appearance with a noble figure and a dignified and resolute expression. John Lang, who could get a glimpse of the Rani by accident gives a very vivid picture of her. He observes: "She was a woman of about the middle size—rather stout, but not too stout. Her face must have been very handsome when she was younger, and even now it had many charms..... though according to my idea of beauty, it was too round. The expression was also very good, and very intelligent. The eyes were particularly fine, and the nose very delicately shaped. She was not very fair, though she was far from black. She had no ornaments, strange to say, upon her person, except a pair of gold ear-rings. Her dress was a plain white muslin, so fine in texture, and drawn about her in such a way, and so tightly, that the outline of her figure was plainly discernible..... and a remarkably fine figure she had....."⁵

The Rani cast off purdah, after assuming the administration of the state, for the efficient working of her government as well as for closer ties with her officials and her people. It is also reported that her dress was not the ordinary costume generally worn by ladies. She donned on her head a small cap of bright coloured scarlet silk with pearls and rubies laced into it and wore a pair of loose trousers. Her waist was tightly drawn in by a belt embroidered with gold and in it was stuck her sword. She usually donned this dress while she appeared in her court when she supervised her troops. After the death of her husband, the Rani had discarded most of her ornaments, but she wore gold bangles in her hands, a pearl necklace and a diamond ring.⁶

Rani Lakshmi Bai led a simple but strenuous life. An eye witness account of her daily routine of life has been given by Vishnu Godse in his famous work 'Manjha Pravas.' He observes: "Lakshmi Bai got up early in the morning and after the usual ablutions spent her time up to 7 or 8 A.M. in doing physical exercise and horse riding etc. After that she slept for an hour or so and then took her bath for which she had a great liking. She then, after donning a white chanderi sari, devoted herself to religious meditation and worship, at the same time the state musicians played on music and the religious persons recited stories from the Puranas. She took her meal at midday and after a while cast a look at the nazar presented to her. She picked up some thing of her liking giving the rest for distribution among the dependents. She appeared in the Court at 3 o'clock in the afternoon. She sat on a raised seat behind a curtain and looked to the civil, criminal and revenue works. She visited the temple of Mahalakshmi with her adopted son on every Tuesday and Friday."⁷

Rani Lakshmi Bai was the quintessence of many virtues. She was pious, pure and generous with a soft corner in her heart for the poor and the distressed. No needy man ever returned disappointed from her place. Vishnu Godse narrates that on one day when the Rani returned from the temple of Mahalakshmi, thousands of beggars waited upon her. On enquiry she was told by Diwan Lakshmi Rao that the condition of the beggars had become miserable due to excessive winter as they had no clothes to cover bodies. She was much aggrieved to know it. She immediately ordered to give every beggar on the coming fourth day a cap, a cotton-padded waist coat and a blanket. The order was carried out and about 4000 caps and waist coats were distributed.⁸

Rani Lakshmi Bai was an able administrator gifted with an astounding organizing capacity. Even the British authorities acknowledged her extraordinary capability. During the course of the revolt, when the British rule was almost extinct in Jhansi Major Erskine, the commissioner of Sagar and Narbada Territories had no hesitation in intrusting the management of the district to her. Being dissatisfied with the attitude of the British Government, the Rani had to set up her own 'independent government' at Jhansi, which she managed very capably. In the morning she supervised the work in the political and military officers, while she sat in her court in the afternoon and look to the administration of the department of justice, revenue and accounts. The Rani was strict in the administration of justice. She had a sharp intellect. She grasped the matter quickly and issued orders instantly. Sometimes, she herself wrote the orders.⁹ The Rani devoted herself fully to the welfare of her people. She never hesitated in performing even the most arduous task. The thieves had created much trouble in Barwa Sagar and the people of that place had become panicky. She personally went to Barwa Sagar and stayed there for fifteen days. The thieves were traced out and punished, to the great relief of the people.¹⁰ Like husband Raja Gangadhar Rao, the Rani took interest in the development of the royal library. She spent large

sums of money on acquiring new books on religion and philosophy.¹¹

Rani Lakshmi was a born leader and a capable commander. Besides being a skilled horse rider, she was remarkably adept in swordsmanship. It is reported that she was so bold and daring that she sometimes fought with her enemies with swords in both of her hands and the reins of her horse between her teeth. The Rani was also a good shooter. She hardly missed her target. She was courageous and dauntless. She never lost hope; on the contrary she was a source of great inspiration for her troops. In the battle fields, she was always in the vanguard. It was because of these qualities that within a very short span of time, the troops of Jhansi achieved the distinction of being the best revolutionary force. She was received ovation even from her adversaries. Sir Hugh Rose was full of praise for the fine qualities of the Rani. He aptly observes: "The high descent of the Rani, her unbounded liberality to her troops and retainers, and her fortitude which no reverses could shake rendered her an influential and dangerous adversary."¹² "He considered her 'the bravest and best Military leader of the Rebels.'¹³

G.B. Malleson points out that "she was driven by ill treatment into rebellion; that her cause was a righteous cause; and that the treatment she received at the hands of Lord of Dalhousie was one of the main causes of the disaffection in Bundelkhand and Central India 1857."¹⁴

Rani Lakshmi Bai was much popular. She was held in high esteem by her people and the manner in which every citizen of Jhansi stood behind her bears ample testimony to Major Malcolm's remark that she bore a very high character and was much respected by every one at Jhansi. John Sir Keye dismissed evil things said against her as a myth.¹⁵

Dr. S.N. Sen rightly observes: "If the reverence of her own people is any compensation for vilification by her enemies, the Rani of Jhansi stands more than vindicated. Thousands of unsophisticated villagers still sing of the valour and virtues of the women who held her own against her Bundela enemies to fall under a British bullet."¹⁶ Shrimati Yamuna Sheorey, granddaughter of the late Chintamani Rao Tample, brother of the Rani gives the following account of the Rani's last fight and subsequent: "June 18, 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 mounted her steed and plunged into the battle field.....Her followers carried her bleeding to the hut Baba Ganga Das. The Sadhu recognized her and put the holy Ganga Water in her mouth. She was heard to mutter "Har Har Mahadeva" and became unconscious. After a while she regained consciousness and whispered "Om Namoh Bhagvate 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. Her wish that her body should not fall into British hands was fulfilled."¹⁷

Conclusion

Rani Lakshmi Bai's place in history is secure. She was the embodiment of freedom. She showed her countrymen the path of liberty. Although revolt failed and her great ambition of liberating her motherland from foreign bondage could not be fulfilled, yet her brave action and deeds have made her name immortal. By sacrificing her life on the altar of the country's freedom she has become a martyr.

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