

Jhansi Lakshmi Bai



It was one evening after the rainy season. Outside Bethur, along the road on the banks of Ganga, three horses were galloping. Two riders were young men and one a girl.

When one of the young men overtook her, the little girl galloped her horse faster and overtook him. Was the young man to accept defeat? Of course, he tried to overtake her but his horse stumbled and he fell down.

"O Manoo, I am dead"

When she heard that sorrowful cry, the girl rode back. The young man was hurt and was bleeding. With difficulty she lifted him and made him sit on her horse. By that time the other rider also joined them. All the three returned to the palace.

When the horse returned without the rider, Baji Rao the Second, the Peshwa of the Mahrata Empire, was quite disturbed. Although Moropanth who was with him tried to soothe him, his mind was troubled. When his children returned he breathed a sigh of relief.

The injured youth was Baji Rao's adopted son Nana Saheb and his companion, his younger brother Rao Saheb. The girl was

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Manubai, the only daughter of Moropanth, a member of the Peshwa's council.

When they returned home Moropanth said:

"Manu, how unfortunate! Nana has been seriously hurt."

"Not so, father; he has been hurt just a little. Did not Abhimanyu continue to fight although seriously injured?"

"Those times were different, Manu."

"What is the difference, father? It is the same sky, the same earth. The sun and the moon are also the same."

"But Manu, the fortunes of the country have changed. This is the age of British. We are powerless before them."

The father's reasoning did not appeal to the daughter. The father himself had taught her the lessons of the lives and the examples of the saintly Seeta, the brave Jeejabai and the brave Tarabai.

Another incident happened in the same town of Bethur: Nana saheb and Rao Saheb went out on an elephant. Baji Rao wanted to send Manubai with them. Moropanth also wished it. But their wish was not fulfilled. Nana Saheb asked the mahout to move on. Manu was disappointed.

The father said to the daughter when they were back home: "Manu, we must move with the times. Are we chieftains or kings to ride elephants? We should not wish for something for which we are not destined."

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"No, not so, father; I am destined to own not one but several elephants," replied Manu.

"So, be it."

"Father dear, I will not practise shooting with a rifle," so saying she left.

Observing her manly qualities Moropanth was troubled.

Baji Rao the Second was the Peshwa only in name. The British East India Company was paying him a pension of eight lakh rupees a year and had given the 'jagir' (the free gift) of Bethur.

Bhagirathibai was the wife of Moropanth. She was goodlooking, cultured, intelligent and Godly. Manubai was the daughter of this ideal couple.

The child, born on the Second day of Karthika (the 19th of November 1835) was beautiful like her mother. She had a broad forehead and big eyes. Her face reflected royalty.

Manu lost her mother when she was four years old. The entire duty of bringing up the daughter fell on the father. Along with formal education she acquired skill in sword fight, horse riding and shooting with a gun.

The young girl became the wife of Gangadhar Rao, Maharaja of Jhansi, in 1842. The poor Brahmin's girl became Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi.

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It was the beginning of the nineteenth century. The British who came to India for trade began steadily to acquire political power in the name of the East India Company.

The Indian rajas and maharajas who were engaged in quarrels competed with one another to become puppets in the hands of the British.

Every misfortune of India at the time was used to expand the British Empire. One kind of agreement was reached when the British had the upper hand, quite a different kind of agreement was reached when the British were defeated. In any case, the Indians were the sufferers.

After the British removed the last Peshwa from power, their arrogance was boundless. They brushed aside even the Mughul Emperor.

Dawn is the child of the night. On one side there was a determined effort to destroy freedom; on the other side attempts were being made to get ride of slavery.

The love of freedom can never be put down; the more it is suppressed the stronger it grows. On one side the crowns of the native kings were trembling, the kings were accepting the humiliating conditions imposed by the Company Government and their states were being made protected states. On the other hand, the desires was growing to nip British rule in the bud and defend the country's freedom and honor. But outwardly there was calm; everything was

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being done secretly; the country was like the Volcano which is silent and secret before erupting.

Jhansi is now the headquarters of a district in Uttar Pradesh. There were two conditions in the treaty between the British and the Raja of Jhansi – the first, that, whenever the British needed help Jhansi should help them, and, the second, that the consent of the British was necessary to decide who should be the ruler of Jhansi. So the seed of total ruin was sown.

In 1838 the British appointed Gangadhar Rao as the Raja.

The former Raja Raghunath Rao had left the treasury empty. The administration had collapsed and the people had no place. Gangadhar Rao quickly set right everything.

The place acquired more cattle, elephant and horses. The armoury was well stocked with arms and ammunition. The army had five thousand infantry and five hundred cavalry; and these were supported by artillery.

But the British army was also stationed in the State. On this account alone the treasury was spending rupees 2,27,000

In 1851 Maharani Lakshmi Bai gave birth to a son. But the fate was cruel; within three months the child died. Gangadhar Rao was troubled about the future of the state. This led to mental illness.

The reason for that distress was the cruel rule followed by Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General. Some native rulers had accepted the help of the British; the British, in return, had imposed a condition: if the ruler died without children the British would take over

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the state. Even if the ruler adopted a son, the adopted son would not have ruling powers. Lord Dalhousie's rule was this: a yearly pension would be fixed for the descendants and the full responsibility for protecting the state would be that of the British Government.

Applying this rule the British had swallowed many native states. Now it was the turn of Jhansi. To Maharaja Gangadhar Rao, who was already old, this was a serious blow. He was bedridden. In 1853 the Maharaja and Lakshmi Bai decided to adopt Anand Rao, a boy of their community.

Anand Rao was adopted according to religious rites and he was named Damodar Rao.

After the celebrations were over, Gangadhar Rao wrote a letter to the Company. He gave all the details about the adoption and requested the Company to recognize the adopted son as the heir. He suggested that, till Damodar Rao came of age, Rani Lakshmi Bai should be recognized as his representative. The Maharaja reminded the Company of the friendly relations between Jhansi and the Company. The letter was handed over by the Maharaja to Major Ellis with a request to give it to Lord Dalhousie.

The Maharaja shed tears when handing over the letter. He was overcome by emotion and his voice was choked. The sobs of the Maharani crying behind the curtain could be heard.

Gangadhar Rao told the Major: "Major Saheb, my Rani is a woman. But she is endowed with many qualities which even the

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ablest men of the world should appreciate." As he was speaking, unknown to him, his eyes were filled with tears.

"Major Saheb, please see that on no account Jhansi becomes an orphan," he said.

Within a few days, on 21st November 1853, Gangadhar Rao died. The inexperienced 18-years-old Lakshmi Bai became a widow.

A Hindu woman – that too, a young woman and a widow – bound by the chains of custom; in addition, the responsibility of a state with no protection; on one side, Dalhousie who was waiting to annex the kingdom; on the other; Damodar Rao, an infant in her arms, this was the plight of Lakshmi Bai. Limitless, endless her problems and her sorrows!

Lakshmi Bai sent a number of petitions to Dalhousie for a decision on the Maharaja's representation. Three months passed, but there was no reply.

On one unfortunate day, in March 1854, Dalhousie's order arrived.

It read: 'The Company does not recognize the right of the late Maharaja Gangadhar Rao to adopt an heir. It has, therefore, been decided to merge Jhansi in the British provinces. The Rani should vacate the fort and live in the palace situated in the city. She will be paid a monthly pension of rupees five thousand.'

The Rani could not believe it at first. She was taken aback for some time, and then exclaimed: "No, impossible: I shall not surrender my Jhansi."

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It did not take her long to realize how difficult it was for the small state of Jhansi to appose the British might and cleverness, when even the Peshwas had bowed before it. The kings of Delhi also were on their knees before the British

After the British took over the government from her, the Rani's daily routine changed. Every morning the hours from four to eight were set apart for bathing, worship, meditation and prayer. From eight to eleven she would go for a horse ride, practise shooting with a gun, and practise swordsmanship and shooting with arrows, with the reins hold in the teeth. Thereafter she would bathe again, feed the hungry, give alms to the poor and then have food; then she rested for a while. After that she would exercise lightly in the evening. Later she would go through some religious books and hear religious sermons. Then she worshipped her chosen deity and had supper. All things were done methodically, according to a strict time-table.

People who dumbly suffer tyranny and injustice are like breathing corpses. It is moral to bow to justice, immoral to bow to injustice.

Even the nut caught in the nutcracker leaps. Under severe pressure the cannon- ball explodes. Even a mild animal gets ready to retaliate against cruelty, without thinking of what may happen.

The king who lost their kingdoms because they had no sons, the members of their families, their dependents, the disbanded army, the well-wishers of all these people – all were seething with discontent.

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Tatia Tope, Raghunath Simha, Jawahar Simha and such lovers of freedom were secretly coming to meet Rani Lakshmi Bai. They used to give her details of the dissatisfaction and discontent of the people.

Rani Lakshmi Bai had carefully studied the geography of her kingdom, the strategic points and the formation of the Sikh army of Punjab in its fight with the British

When the Rani went out on horseback she was attired like men; she wore a metallic helmet and on top of it, a flowing turban, a protecting metallic plate bound close to the chest, pyjamas and a sash over them. On both sides she carried pistols and daggers. In addition she carried a sabre.

The Rani, who was conversant with the characteristic marks and the mettle of different types of horses, liked most the Kathiawar horse of spotless white color.

The Rani had flowing hair and so it was difficult for her to wear the helmet and tie the turban over it. In Maharashtra widows used to shave their heads. The Rani decided to have her hair removed at Benares. In addition, she wanted to study the political situation in that part of the country.

But the British officials did not permit her journey.

The Rani took an oath: "I will remove my hair only after the country gains freedom; otherwise it can take place only in the cemetery."

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The dissatisfied Nana saheb and Rao Saheb, Bahadu Shah, the King of Delhi, and the well-wishers of the Nawab of Oudh were all anxious to meet. The same thought came to the Rani also.

A religious celebration was the occasion when all the leaders could meet.

The adopted son Damodar Rao had by then completed six years and entered the seventh. Arrangements were made to invest him with the sacred thread.

A petition was sent to the British officer in charge of the state. There were six lakh rupees in the treasury in Damodar Rao's name. The petition asked for permission to withdraw a lakh of rupees for the religious ceremony.

"Damodar Rao is still young. If four persons stand surety to my satisfaction the amount will be paid," said the British officer.

The Rani swallowed the insult and got the money. The leaders met for the religious ceremony.

Women kept strict watch all round the place, as the leaders held their meeting.

The leaders had some information. The Hindu soldier's in the British army were enraged because they were not allowed to wear the 'tilaka' (a sacred mark) on their foreheads; in the same way the Muslim soldiers were enraged because they were compelled to use cartridge smeared with fat. There was deep discontent in the army.

Haste was unwise. Also, the army was not yet quite ready. It was also necessary to ensure that during there would be no looting

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and dacoity. Otherwise the sympathy of the people would be lost. This was the stand of the Rani. Others agreed.

Using Song and fairs and entertainment, the women also engaged in fanning dissatisfaction in the army camps. The Rani was kept informed of all that happened.

The full moon day of Holi Feast had passed. It was a pitch dark night in February. Tatia Tope came to meet the Rani.

Tatia brought with him a handbill. It read: 'it is impossible to suffer any more. How long can we bear the agony of the danger pierced through the heart? Arise and get ready to sacrifice your life for justice. Some tyrants have kept this country in subjection, drive them away. Free the country; uphold the right.'

The Rani felt that the time was not yet ripe. Tatia said that there was extreme dissatisfaction in the army, that it was not difficult to get the money needed and that arms and ammunition were ready.

It was decided that throughout the country people should rise in revolt on Sunday the 31st of May.

The lotus is the emblem of the greatness of Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning, and Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. This lotus was chosen as the symbol of the revolution. The cake also became a sign of the revolution. The way to spread the message of revolution was this: the cake sent from one town would be accepted and in its place another sent to the next town.

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There was no change in the routine of the Rani. In the midst of worship, prayer and religious discourses preparations for the war went on.

"Your Highness, why still this training for fighting? Can you not set apart some more time for meditation upon God?" questioned a bosom friend once.

"I am a Kshatriya woman; I am doing my duty. It is the duty of Kshatriyas to protect the country and justice. If necessary, we must be prepared to fight. I cannot surrender to any enemy, I cannot just weep and die like a helpless widow. I shall fight for my cause and accept death with a smile"

On 4th of June the revolution burst in Kanpur. Signs of trouble were seen in Jhansi the same day. One Havildar with a few soldiers entered the Star Fort, newly constructed by the British, and seized war materials and money.

Immediately arrangement were made to shift the British women and children to the fort. The British officers came to request Rani's help. "We are quite confident of bringing the situation under control. But at this difficult time you must also help us", they requested."

The Rani replied: "I do not have an army or weapons. If you agree I am prepared to get together an army to protect the People."

The British agreed to the proposal. But, when on the very next day the soldiers shot and killed a British officer, they were alarmed.

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At once the senior officer raced to the Rani. He said, "We are men, we are not worried about ourselves. But you must afford shelter to our women and children in your palace."

The Rani's friends advised her not to make any such promises. But she said firmly: "Our war is only against the men among the English, not against women and children. If I cannot check our soldier in this matter how can I be their leader? The English women and children will get shelter in the palace immediately.'

So assured the Rani. And not only this; she fed and took care of them throughout the war.

The leaderless army had scored a victory over the British. The soldiers wished to loot Jhansi. The Rani then gave her jewels and money to the soldiers and they were satisfied. The army marched towards Delhi.

The Rani took action at once to end the anarchy. The chieftains and commanders begged the Rani with one voice to become the ruler of the state. The Rani consented. Once again the flag of the state fluttered gaily on the top of the fort.

Jhansi prepared for war working day and night. New arms were manufactured. But within a period of four or five days a new danger confronted the Rani.

Thinking that Jhansi was being ruled by a weak woman, one Sadashiva Rao rebelled in a part of the state and proclaimed himself the King. Immediately the Maharani went there and put down the rebellion.

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An army under the command of Sir Hugh Rose reached Jhansi. He sent word to the Maharani to come unarmed along with her friends and meet him.

But the Rani refused. She replied that she would go to any meeting only with her army.

Within a period of ten months (June 1857 to March 1858) after Lakshmi Bai took over the administration of Jhansi from the British, it had improved. The treasury was full. The army was well organized. There was an army of women matching the army of men.

The Rani had named some of her guns: 'Mighty Road', 'Bhavani Shankar' and 'lightning Streak.' These guns were being fired by turns by men and women. Old weapons were sharpened. New weapons were got ready. During those days every house in Jhansi was busy preparing for the war. And everything was done under the guidance of the Maharani.

The army under Sir Hugh Rose declared war on 23rd March 1858.

For ten or twelve days the tiny state of Jhansi marched in the light and the shadow of victory and defeat. The relief of one success was followed the next moment by the shock of a defeat. Many faithful Sirdars fell. Unfortunately no help came from outside.

When the British gained the upper hand and Hugh Rose's army entered Jhansi City, the Rani herself took up arms. She put on the cloths of a man and she fought like the Goddess of War. Whenever

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she fought the British army bowed down. Her organization of her forces and her fight – worthy of a man – surprised Hugh Rose.

When the situation went out of control the Maharani called the courtiers who yet remained and placed her suggestion before them: "Our commanders and our heroic soldiers and artillery men are not with us now. Of the four thousand soldiers' in the fort not even four hundred are left now. The fort is not strong. Therefore we must leave this place as early as possible. We must organize an army and then attack again." The noblemen agreed.

Accompanied by some warriors, the Rani forced her way through the enemy lines and departed from Jhansi.

A British officer, Boker by name, followed her with an army. He was himself injured during the fighting and retreated. The Rani's horse died. Even then she did not loss hear but went to Kalpi and joined Tatia Tope and Rao Saheb.

Even in Kapli the Rani was busy getting together an army. Hugh Rose laid siege to Kalpi. When defeat was certain, Rao Saheb, Tatia and others fled with the Rani towards Gwalior.

They reached Gopalpur and took rest in a grove. During the night Rao Saheb, Tatia and the next morning met the Rani. They had lost the will to fight.

The Rani said, "We have so far stayed inside the fort and faced the British. That is what we should continue to do. Gwalior Fort is near here. It is true that the Raja there is inclined towards the British. But I know that the army and the people are against British. In

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addition, there is already a huge stock of guns and ammunition there."

The Rani's suggestion was acceptable to the noblemen. When Tatia Tope reached Gwalior with an army in Gwalior cooperated. The Raja of Gwalior ran away and sought the protection of the British at Agra.

But what happened thereafter was a repetition of the earlier foolishness. The leaders were indulged in merrymaking and the timely warning of the Rani wafted away on the air.

The Rani who was away from such reverly undertook inspection of the vulnerable parts of the Gwalior Fort. She prepared a stronghold. But the other leaders did not lend their ears to the advice of this lady.

Hugh Rose played a trick. He brought to Gwalior, Maharaja Jayaji Rao Sindhia who had run away from Gwalior and was living in Agra under the protection of the British. "The British are fighting to enable Maharaja Jayaji Rao to get back the throne. Therefore, all soldiers who return will be pardoned." Proclaimed Rose.

Now some wisdom dawned on the Peshwas. They were ashamed to face Rani Lakshmi Bai. Finally they sent Tatia Tope. When they begged for pardon, the Rani place before them her plan of war. Tatia Tope accepted it.

Although the Rani's forces were small in numbers, the extraordinary courage of the Sirdars and the war strategy and

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courage of the Rani inflicted defeat on the British army. The day's victory was due to the Rani.

Next day (18th) before sunrise the British war bugle sounded. The pardon proclaimed by Maharaja Jayaji Rao had tempted some soldiers and they had joined the British. Information was also received that two brigades which were under the Rao Saheb had again transferred their allegiance to the British.

Rani Lakshmi Bai sent for Ramachandra Rao Deshmukh and said: "today appears to be the last day of the war. If I die, consider my son Damodar more precious than my life and take care of him. One word more: if I die, make sure that my body does not fall into the hands of those who do not belong to my religion."

As expected, that day Rose had the upper hand. A large part of the army of revolutionaries fell. Their guns fell into the hands of the British. The British army entered the fort swift as a flood.

There was no other course for the Rani than to escape from that place. Holding the horse's reins in her teeth and flashing the sword with both the hands the Rani rode away. A few Pathan Sirdars, Raghunatha Simha and Ramachandra Rao Deshmukh were with her. The British army had encircled them.

Blood was flowing freely. The sun had the same hue in the western horizon. Darkness was approaching. A British soldier who came very near threw a dagger at the Rani's chest. It struck her a little below the chest. The Rani killed the soldier. Blood was flowing from her body. But there was no time to rest. The British army was

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pursuing her. When the Rani was about to cross the Swarnarekha Canal a shot from the gun of a British soldier who came there struck her right thigh. Flashing the sword with her left hand, the Rani put an end to him.

Even the horse she had chosen for the hour of danger did not help. One thigh was numb. Blood was flowing from stomach. The sword cut inflicted by a British soldier who followed her speedily tore the right cheek. Her eye-ball was wrenched. Even then with her lefthand she cut off the arm of that soldier.

Gul Mohamed ,who was the bodyguard of the Rani, could not bear his sorrow. He, a warrior who had fought bravely, began to weep.

Raghunath Simha and Ramachandra Rao Deshmukh helped the Rani to dismount from her horse. Raghunath Simha said: "There is not a moment to lose. We must quickly reach the house of Baba Gangadas nearby."

Ramachandra Rao put the weeping boy Damodar on a horse, took the Rani's body on his lap and raced towards Saint Baba Gangadas's house. Raghunath Simha and Gul Mohamed followed as bodyguards.

Even in darkness Baba Gangadas recognized the Rani's bloodstained face. They washed the face with cold water. They poured water from the holy Ganga into her mouth. She recovered a little and with trembling lips muttered: "Hara Hara Mahadev.' Thereafter she became unconscious.

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A little later the Rani opened her eyes with difficulty. She was them muttering stanzas from the Bhagavad Gita which she had learnt by heart in her childhood. The voice grew feebler; her last words were, "Vasiudeva I bow to you." The fortune of Jhansi set.

Raghunath Simha, Gul Mohamed and Damodar Rao shed tears.

In a solemn voice, Baba Gangadas said: "Brightness has no end; it is hidden in every atom. It shines again at the proper time."

The incomparable Rani's body disappeared in flames.

Jhansi Rani Lakshmi Bai brought glory to the women of Indian. Her life was sacred hymn. Her life is a thrilling story of womanliness, courage, adventure, deathless patriotism and martyrdom.

She was a woman although in her tender body there was a Lion's spirit. But she was well versed in statesmanship. Like all women she was weak. But when she went to war and took up arms she was the very embodiment of the War Goddess Kali. She was beautiful and frail. But her radiance made men diffident. She was young in years. But her foresight and firm decisions were mature.

When, after growing up under the loving care of her father, she entered her husband's house she became an ideal wife. On the death of her husband although she lost interest in life she did not forget her responsibilities. She was a staunch Hindu; but, because she was tolerant of other religions, when she led an army in a Great War, Muslims followed her first as the Hindu did.

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Lakshmi Bai lived but for 22 years and seven months – from 19th of November 1835 to the 18th of June 1858; she flashed and disappeared like lightning on a dark night.

The words of the British General Sir Hugh Rose, who fought against the Rani several times and was defeated again and again, and finally defeated the Rani (who became the victim of circumstances) bear witness to her greatness:

"Of the mutineers the bravest and the greatest commander was the Rani."

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