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Women's Voices from History: Gond Rani Durgawati and Rani Lakshmibhai

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**WOMEN'S VOICES FROM HISTORY:
GOND RANI DURGAWATI AND RANI LAKSHMIBHAI**

Nandini Sengupta and Moupia Basu

Abstract:

Two strong women are compared and contrasted in this article. Gond Rani Durgawati (1524-1564) led a resistance movement in Jabalpur against the Mughal rule of Akbar. Rani Lakshmibai (1828-1858) organized the people of Jhansi against Sir Hugh Rose, an officer defending the interests of the British East India Company. Both women continue to be remembered for their bravery and their loyalty to the people they ruled.

Key Words: Gond, Rani Durgawati, Rani Lakshmibai, Akbar, Hugh Rose, Jabalpur, Jhansi, George Malleison

Feminine voices from India's past have had a way of morphing memory and mythology into a unique narrative that is equal parts folk and fantasy. Oral and folk traditions remember history by mixing myth and magic with memory but every once in a while, the character so created becomes something more than what she was in reality. Two queens from India's medieval and early modern past exemplify this tradition—Gond Rani Durgawati (1524-1564) and Rani Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi (1828-1858). Both queens are *veeranganas* or brave hearts, both left a virile imprint on local imagination, and both became symbols of resistance for a people looking for glory and redemption in the past. And yet their similarities end there. While one queen became deified as a goddess in local memory, the other became an icon of defiance in modern India's fight against colonial rule. And yet the most interesting part of this myth makeover was that the final avatar did not quite capture the nuance of the historical character in all her complexity. In becoming a goddess or a freedom phoenix, the historical Durgawati and Lakshmibai lost their layers—they became more unidimensional than what contemporary sources painted them to be.

**Rani Durgawati: A *veerangana* Who Became a Goddess in
Local and Folk Traditions**

The story of India's *veerangana* or braveheart tradition and the battle-ready, steel-spined women it has spawned through history is a curious case of how folk songs and folk tales transform memory into myth. Sometimes that process leads to the deification of a historical figure whose valour and dedication to dharma have set them apart in popular imagination. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in central India, the land that was once known as Gondwana, the home of the tribal Gond. Gond folk songs routinely reference history, using myth and memory as much to remember and

revere as to resist and reconstruct. For the tribal Gonds, their story is intrinsically connected to their identity and their community pride. To be Gond is to remember and one of the most oft-remembered figures in this land redolent with *itihasa* and *samskara* is Gond Rani Veerangana Durgawati. Her medieval tribal kingdom of Garha Mandla or Gadha Katanga spanned north Gondwana which currently comprises the districts of Jabalpur, Narsinghpur, Hoshangabad, Harda, Betul, Chhindwara, Seoni, Mandla and Dindori in Madhya Pradesh. This strip of land is bordered by the Bhandar range in the north and the Satpura range in the south and is washed by two rivers, the Narmada and the Sone.

Rani Durgawati's memory is deeply embedded in the psyche of her people, both Gond and otherwise. Her glorious reign and her indomitable courage are a crucial staple for bard songs to this day. That in itself is not so unusual—from bardic glorification to hero stones in village temples, community memory has always found a way to hold on to history and protect it from political spin-doctoring through the centuries. Durgawati herself is by no means the only Gond ruler whom bards sing about—Raja Shankar Shah and Raghunath Shah, martyred heroes of the 1857 uprising, are just as venerated as the queen. Like her, they have their own Samadhi Sthal (memorial site) in Jabalpur (Madhya Pradesh) and like her their day of martyrdom or Balidaan Diwas on September 18—the day British forces tied them to the muzzle of a cannon and blew them up—is celebrated every year with pomp and pageantry. But that's where the comparison ends. Rani Durgawati is not just a model monarch and a figure of glorious resistance from history. To her people, she is a goddess, undistinguishable from her celestial namesake, the Goddess Durga. In song after song, in temple traditions and folk stories, she becomes the goddess herself, an incarnation of the fierce feminine that's so potent and powerful as to deserve not just respect but worship.

Take this Gondi folk song which eulogises the queen for being Garha's protector and patron saint.

*Tari nana, mor nana, rey nana
Rani Durgawati jo aaye. Mata Durga jo aaye.
Ran Ma jujhe dharey talwaar. Rani Durga
kahaye. Tek.
Raja Dalpat key rani ho, Ran Chandi kahaye.
Dagar Dagar Ma dolon ho, Garh Mandla
bachaye.¹
All hail the queen Durgawati.
All hail the Goddess Mother Durga.
She is battle ready with a sword in hand.*

¹ Rambharos Agarwal, *Garha Mandla ke Gond Raja*, (Hindi) (Mandla Press, 1961), pp. 72-75.

That's why she is called Rani Durga. She is Raja Dalpat's queen and she's like Ran Chandi, an incarnation of Goddess Durga. She is everywhere and she protects Garha Mandla."²

History tells us that the Gond queen fought determined battles all through her 15 year-rule and fobbed off hostile neighbours who had ideas about a rich kingdom ruled by a woman. She faced more than 50 skirmishes in her lifetime and remained unvanquished all through except the last decisive encounter against Mughal Emperor Akbar's senior general Asaf Khan. Even in this battle, she actually won the first round and lost the second only because her generals refused to comply with her command to carry out a night raid. Unsurprisingly the Gonds see her as the virile version of Goddess Durga—Ran Chandi. Another Gondi song actually exhorts her people to seek her blessings as the queen and the goddess are one and the same.

*Mata Durga Ran Chandi ke laybo charan pakhar
Hath jor binti karey ho, jay jay hovay tumhar.*

Mother Durga is the incarnation
of the Goddess Ran Chandi.
We should cling to her feet.

Pray to her with folded hands for victory.³

Contemporary secular references talk about the queen's scholarship, competence as a monarch, benevolence and beauty but they do not cross reference an ideal queen with a goddess. That is a much later development. For instance, the mid-17th century Ramnagar inscription in Mandla district, dated to the reign of Raj Gond king Hirde Shah, nearly a century after Durgawati's fall in the Battle of Narai Nala, calls her the very image of good fortune and virtue: "*Samriddhireva swarupini purnyaparamparaiva sawbhagyasimaiva vasundharaya Durgawati tasya Babhuvapatni*"⁴ Similarly, 18th century poet Keshav Dixit describes Rani Durgawati as a queen who is full of virtuous qualities in the Sanskrit literary work Gadhes Nrupa Varnan Sangraha Slokah. "*Urbara sarvato bhumih madhyato Narmada nadi/Vigya Durgawati ragyi Garha rajye trayogunah*" (The kingdom of Garha has fertile farmlands everywhere with the Narmada river flowing through it and it is ruled by the learned queen Durgawati whose realm is full of

²Nandini Sengupta, *Rani Durgawati: The Forgotten Life of a Warrior Queen* (Delhi: Penguin Press, 2022), p. 7.

³ Suresh Mishra, *Rani Durgawati* (Hindi) (Bhopal: Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, 2012), p. 71.

⁴ Suresh Mishra, *Tribal Ascendancy in Central India: The Gond Kingdom of Garha* New Delhi: Manak, 2007), p. 308. Also appears in Sengupta, op. cit., p. 100.

accomplishments).⁵ It is a lyrical and very effusive description of the queen and her country but the poet is clear that the object of his effusion is still very much mortal, not divine.

Even when the tribute does liken the queen's qualities to a celestial being – given her role in ensuring the prosperity of her realm, it is Kamadhenu she is most likened to in the more contemporary references – there is no attempt to confer divinity to this very historical figure. The Ramnagar inscription, for instance, describes her thus: “Durgawati was as prosperity itself to the fortunes of petitioners, beautiful as the image of virtue” and then again, “By her own renown famed in the three worlds, she made this whole earth as it were to change its appearance as an unlimited splendid Hemachala” and finally, “She who daily presented steeds, elephants and millions of gold in unbounded charity, eclipsed by these high-famed acts, the renown of the Kamadhenu.”⁶

Clearly the bardic tradition focusing on her fight for dharma and highlighting her heroic resistance against a loot-hungry invader (an aspect that is repeatedly mentioned by chroniclers like Abul Fazl and Ferishta) is independent of more mainstream contemporary references. That can also explain why despite attempts at white-washing Asaf Khan's invasion by later Gond rulers who were, by then, Mughal feudatories, local memory has continued to despise both him and Akbar for their role in the queen's final sacrifice and the desiccation of the golden gourd of Garha by the Mughals. An example of how folk traditions managed to weed out political revisionism becomes evident when we compare how the Ramnagar inscription describes Akbar and Asaf Khan as well as the Battle of Narai Nala. The inscription likens Akbar to Arjuna, Asaf Khan to Bheema and the battle as a tax raid: “Asaf Khan, with an army, was deputed by King Akbar, Puruhuta of the earth, all but compeer of Partha, for the purpose of levying a contribution.”⁷ In contrast, folk songs call Asaf Khan the enemy, a coward who loses repeatedly to the queen when faced with the belligerent courage of her soldiers:

*Naam Asaf dushmon kay, gayish dhari dhari haar
Saj dhaj kaya ave tisariya, fauji dharey hathiyar.*⁸

The enemy is called Asaf Khan and he lost his battle as the men of Garha wore their war gear and picked up their weapons.⁹

Indeed, so definitive is the queen's divinity in the folk songs that they actually imagine an entire altercation between Durgawati and

⁵ Sengupta, p. 100.

⁶ Suresh Mishra, 2007, p. 308.

⁷ Fitz-Edward Hall, “On the Kings of Maṇḍala as Commemorated in a Sanskrit Inscription Now First Printed in the Original Tongue,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 7, 1860, p. 14.

⁸ Suresh Mishra, 2007, op. cit., p. 226.

⁹ Sengupta, 2022, op. cit., p. 138.

Akbar in which her magical powers force him to beg for mercy and call her the Divine Mother in his plead. In the following song, the invocation is both to the Goddess and the queen – they become interchangeable in their ability to offer protection against a particularly truculent adversary whom she fobs off using nature as a weapon.

*Ari Ma jujhha racho hai Garh kho garey ho Ma, tek
Kahana key tum chalay aghua kahan ugahan jaye
Garh Dilli mein chalein ughua nagar ugahan jaye
Mare kutein chaley ughua durjan patiya churaye
Tum ka raj karat ho Akbar, durjan patiya churaye.
Oh Mother please protect Garha.
Tell us what to do and we will do it.
Soldiers from Delhi are at our doorstep.
They will destroy us.
The aggressors will kill and maim.
They will invade our land
What does Akbar know of good governance?
He knows only how to invade.¹⁰*

The song then goes on to point out the difference in platoon strength between the two armies – a fact stressed by all contemporary chroniclers including Abul Fazl – using nine lakhs as a template image for the horse and men at arms in the Mughal army. So what happens when this huge army with its horses, elephants and armed soldiers attack the queen? The song stresses that Durgawati simply asks the wind to burn her enemies to cinders. The fire devours the Mughal army and then comes after Akbar as he flees into the forest. (*Age Akbar charein toriya, ohi ban lag gayee aag.*) Desperate and thirsty, Akbar looks to fill his pitcher with water but the moment he dips it, the stream turns to stone. (*Jahan, jahan Akbar bhare gayalba ohi pathhar huye jaye.*) A chastened Akbar learns his lesson—he realizes he needs to propitiate the patron deity of the land he is invading and he does so with an apology and a solemn promise that he will never molest her people again (*Abki chuk vagas mori Mata, ab na ayun tere paas.*) The moment he does so, the Goddess forgives him and his pitcher fills up with water (*Chatt key bharey dhuelva Akbar, patt ke laye uthaye*). Of course, this bit of role reversal, where Durgawati teaches her Mughal adversary a lesson and sends him packing. This is pure fiction.¹¹ But the topsy turvy powerplay obvious in the song is backed by Durgawati's divine powers—she is able to eyeball Akbar because, no matter how powerful, he is only mortal while she is a goddess. His strength is temporal. Hers is celestial.

¹⁰ Mishra, 2007, op. cit., p. 224. Translated by the author.

¹¹ Sengupta, 2022, op. cit., pp. 201-202.

A similar example crops up in a Gondi folk song documented in the 1940s by Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale in their seminal work *Folk Songs of the Maikal Hills*. The song, translated by Elwin and Hivale, makes it clear that the Gonds counted on Durgawati's divine powers to help them in their hour of need.

Be our help on field of battle
For the Moghul army is coming
The daughter, the queen of the world says
Listen my little brother
Send for Indra's horse and arm it
And I will come with Sarada on my right hand
And Hanuman on my left
We will kill a hundred thousand Moghuls
Two hundred thousand Moghul soldiers
Three hundred thousand Emperors
Be our help on the field of battle
For the Delhi Sultan has attacked us.¹²

Even when bards describe her battle readiness, Durgawati is referred to in deific form: "*Chandi roop dhari Maharani dono haath talwar*" (The queen is like Chandi, an fierce incarnation of Goddess Durga, and she is wielding a sword in each hand). Interestingly this bardic tradition continues to this day with modern-day Gond singers referencing the queen as a protector who saved the honour of her people. A recent song by DJ Sarman, for instance, says:

Garh Mandla raj chalaye Rani
Gondon ki laaj bajaye Rani
Mughlon se tu lari larai
Mughlon ko mar bhagaye Rani
She protected Garha Mandla and the honour of the Gonds
She fought the Mughals and drove them away¹³

While contemporary references repeatedly mention the queen's many qualities—scholarship, benevolence, charity and beauty – more modern ballads focus more on her battle bravery than anything else. With the rapid destruction of livelihood and faith under the British Raj, the once prosperous Garha was reduced to penury. Disease and death swept the region. Famine became a common feature. British tax and forest laws restricted access to forest produce causing starvation and despair. Desperate Gond balladeers began to hark back to a bygone day of glory under a monarch who not only ensured plenty but protection against the hated invader—sometimes through divine powers, sometimes on her own. In fact, alongside songs about Garha Mandla's glory days

¹² Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale, *Folk Songs of The Maikal Hills*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 330.

¹³ Sengupta, 2022, op. cit, pp. 118, 112.

under Durgawati are innumerable songs about hunger and heartbreak. In their book *Folk Songs of the Maikal Hills*, Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale mention a number of these songs. This specimen for example leaves the listener in no doubt what the Gonds thought about colonial rule: “In this kingdom of the English how hard it is to live/To pay the cattle tax we have to sell a cow/To pay the forest tax we have to sell a bullock/To pay the land tax we have to sell a buffalo/How are we to get our food.”¹⁴

Durgawati’s persistent divine aura also explains why, till as recently as the 1950s, her Samadhi Sthal or memorial site (located at the precise spot in Jabalpur where she sacrificed her life on June 24, 1564) used to get “diya-baati” or lamp and incense offerings from the local populace. According to Mandla historian Ram Bharosh Agarwal, a servitor called Amar Singh from the Budra Pipriya village called himself “Durgawati ka sevak” or “Durgawati’s servitor” and offered prayers to an old idol of the queen. Today, the new and refurbished Samadhi Sthal continues to get lamp and incense offerings in front of a small idol of both Queen Durgawati and her favourite elephant Sarman.¹⁵ This is not the only example of the queen getting active worship from her people. In neighbouring Chattisgarh, a Shiva temple called Madwa Mahal, features in its inner sanctum not just the Destroyer God’s phallic symbol but also an image of Rani Durgawati displayed right next to a picture of her celestial namesake Goddess Durga or Parvati who happens to be Shiva’s consort as well.

Durgawati’s name is also associated with sacred traditions that have strictly secular contexts. For example, the Sharada Mata temple near her hilltop palace of Madan Mahal in Jabalpur is surrounded by red pennants. These are planted in the rainy months of July and August—a direct reference to the queen’s victory over her neighbour Baz Bahadur of Malwa. After she crushed him in battle, Durgawati planted the first wish fulfilling pennant and since then, every year, devotees throng to the temple to plant red pennants both for wish fulfilment as well as to honor her legacy. Indeed all over Jabalpur, the queen’s footprint has been preserved in everyday traditions like these with local memory adding everything from memory to myth to magic to remember her story.

¹⁴ Elwin and Hivale, *op. cit.* p. 316.

¹⁵ Sengupta, 2022, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

Rani Lakshmibai—A Symbol of Female Heroism or a Modern Secular National Icon?

Sir Hugh Rose, the officer who led the British forces against Jhansi and Maharani Lakshmibai's army, had once remarked: "She's the most dangerous of all Indian leaders! Although a lady, she was the bravest and best military leader of the rebels."¹⁶ He was speaking about Rani Lakshmibai who fought valiantly against the British to retain her kingdom of Jhansi. Called the Indian Joan of Arc by the British, she died a most glorious death fighting till the end when lying wounded. She wished to be cremated before the British troops could get their hands on her. Her engagement with the British forces and subsequent martyrdom catapulted her into the realms of eternal glory. She became an everlasting symbol of patriotism and an archetype of resistance.

Colonel George Malleon, who co-authored the book *History of the Indian Mutiny 1857-58* said about Rani Lakshmibai: "Whatever her faults in British eyes may have been, her countrymen will ever remember that she was driven by ill-treatment into rebellion, and that she lived and died for her country, and that we cannot forget her contribution for India."¹⁷ Maharani Lakshmibai is perhaps the most famous warrior queen of India, a country where the feminine force is considered to be a representation of Shakti or power and as, if not more, powerful as any male force. In a country where the feminine is worshipped as the Mother Goddess it is indeed surprising that any kind of feminine authority or influence is relegated within the walls of domesticity. If at all a female historical character does find any kind of reference it is either as a consort to a male ruler or at the most she is portrayed as a passive force of resistance.

Breaking the stereotype are a few female historical characters who are slowly finding a voice prompting historians to accept the resurgence of female heroism, albeit reluctantly. The deep-rooted patriarchal mindset and social hierarchy have over centuries resisted any kind of dominant feminine force. It is not that we have not heard of women rulers or women warriors at all, but as compared to their male counterparts there have been very few whose valiant lives have been documented fairly and comprehensively. If at all they have been discussed, their lives and character and especially their accomplishments were interpreted, even restyled to fit into the parameters of a male-dominated social system. It is only recently that several women writers are plucking out feisty heroines

¹⁶ Rainer Jerosch, *The Rani of Jhansi: Rebel Against Will* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2007), p. 7.

¹⁷ George Malleon and John Kay, *History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58*, Vol. 5 (London: Longmans, Green, 1898), p. 155

from the past and presenting them in interesting ways. But, the one exception is Rani Lakshmibai who has found more representation than any other of her ilk and is perhaps also one of the most controversial female heroes India has produced. Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi, is hailed as the bravest of the brave. Hugh Rose on her death had declared at the site of her burial, “Here lies the woman who was the only man among the rebels.”¹⁸ For Rose, and the British of course, Lakshmibai was a rebel who fought in the Revolt of 1857, though what is known as the Revolt of 1857 was India’s First War of independence, the crucial turning factor in the fortunes of the East India Company and British colonialism.

If you are in Jhansi you cannot escape the stories of Lakshmibai. You can feel her presence all around. In fact, if it had not been for this *veerangana* (braveheart), Jhansi would have continued to be yet another small and obscure town in the heartland of India. Rani Lakshmibai made Jhansi famous. For a populace that had lost not just its king but the heir apparent as well, Rani Lakshmibai, the widow of the king and mother of the deceased prince, was seen as not just an option but as a saviour.

The people of Jhansi loved her, but what is interesting is that she was never ever deified unlike some other queens. Rani Lakshmibai was considered as one of their own, a woman of flesh and blood, a woman, who against all odds, dared to take on the mighty British single-handedly. It didn’t matter that she was a woman, or that she was only 24 years old or that she had no one to support her even when her immediate neighbouring kingdoms of Datia and Orchha turned hostile and attacked Jhansi when she was most vulnerable. Acclaimed Indian poet Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, who was born just 46 years after the Rani died wrote a passionate and inspiring poem *Jhansi ki Rani* (the queen of Jhansi), by far her most famous poem and a staple of most Indian schools’ curriculum, in which she has brought out the heroism of Lakshmibai:

बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी खूब लड़ी मर्दानी वह तो
झाँसी वाली रानी थी॥

From the bards of Bundela we have heard this story
She fought valiantly like a warrior woman, she was the queen of
Jhansi

The poem includes a stanza that considers her and fighting like a man:

बुंदेले हरबोलों के मुँह हमने सुनी कहानी थी, खूब लड़ी मर्दानी
वह तो झाँसी वाली रानी थी॥

¹⁸ Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 127.

From the Bundele Harbolas' mouths we heard stories
She fought like a man, she was the Rani of Jhansi

For the people of the Indian state of Maharashtra, there is an equally well-known ballad about the brave queen that was written at the spot near Gwalior where she died in battle. The poem was composed by B R Tambe, a poet laureate of Maharashtra who belonged to her clan.

रे हिंदबांधवा, थांब या स्थळीं अश्रु दोन ढाळीं
ती पराक्रमाची ज्योत मावळे इथे झाशिवाली ...
घोड्यावर खंघा
स्वार, हातात नंगि तर्वार
खणखणा करित ती वार
गोऱ्यांची कोंडी
फोडित पाडित वीर इथे आली
मर्दानी झाशीवाली!

You, denizen of this land, pause here and shed a tear or two
For this is where the flame of the valorous lady of Jhansi was
extinguished ...

Astride a stalwart stallion
With a naked sword in hand
She burst open the British siege
And came to rest here, the brave lady of Jhansi!¹⁹

There have been several books written on her, some fictionalized, presenting her in avatars that she was not known to have adopted and those that her subjects wouldn't have liked to accept. Now, herein lies the premise of this discussion. Maharani Lakshmibai's most popular image is that of a warrior. She often dressed as a man and wore almost no jewelry except for a pair of diamond bangles, a diamond ring and a string of pearls around her neck. The only concession she made to her rather austere appearance was not to chop her hair after her husband died—a practice followed stringently by widows those days. Right from childhood, she was known to be a rebel who preferred to spend her days in the company of men and warriors such as Taty Tope and Nana Saheb in the court of the Maratha Peshwa, Baji Rao II. She had mastered horse riding and swordsmanship at a young age. After her marriage to Gangadhar Rao, the king of Jhansi, she often sat beside her husband when he held court and it is believed that the king who was old enough to be her father often relied on her for guidance in state matters. Hence, to watch her on the throne or wield swords and ride horses was not something novel for her subjects.

¹⁹ Jerosch, op. cit., p. 81.

Yet, contrary to her military persona that was visible to all, Lakshmibai was essentially quite the ideal woman that a conservative society would expect. Though she was very young, only 26 when her husband died, she was chaste and celibate. Some books have depicted her as a young woman who gives in to her heart's desire and gets involved with a British lawyer. Another book focusses on her sexuality and yet another portrays her as an unscrupulous and cunning woman (understandably written by a British military officer in 1887). Yet, she was never known to use her feminine charm or even her sexuality to manipulate negotiations with the British. However, in some reports it is hinted that the Rani, who always sat behind a curtain during an audience with British officials, wrapped her sari around her tightly thus accentuating the curves of her shapely figure though this lies uncorroborated. Known to be pleasant looking but with an unpleasant voice the Rani was not known to use her feminine charms as a tool. Evidently, her charms were not lost on the British though, since Hugh Rose is known to have remarked that she was 'personable, clever and beautiful.'²⁰

So, any kind of deviation from her accepted image, would not have gone down well with her subjects and her own value system. In any case there was not much time left for her to romance or waste time adorning herself between her husband's death and the arrival of the British at her doorstep. She had better things to do than indulge in any sort of dalliance with any man. Lakshmibai was known to live a spartan lifestyle and keeping with her social status of a widow, followed a strict and rather disciplined schedule. She woke up at 3 in the morning and devoted herself to religious meditation until eight. Then for three hours she supervised the work in the political and military offices followed by the distribution of alms to the needy. She took her meal at midday and then wrote the 1,100 names of Rama before again appearing in the court at 3 pm. The afternoon was spent in the administration of the various departments of justice, revenue and accounts and these duties lasted until sunset. The remaining hours of the evening she spent in listening to readings from religious books, followed by a bath and a simple dinner.

She expected her civil servants and officers to follow the same sort of discipline and this went a long way in motivating her subjects. In the book *History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58*, by Kaye and Malleon, George Malleon writes that "this force of character added to a splendid and inspiring courage that enabled her some months later to offer to the English troops, under Sir Hugh Rose, a resistance, which made to a less able commander might even have been successful." The Rani's popularity also stemmed from the fact that she created a homogeneous assortment of military as well

²⁰ Malleon and Kaye, op. cit. Vol. 3, p. 126.

as administrative officials and above all, “had no qualms about introducing remarkably democratic notions by consulting with the representatives of the inhabitants of Jhansi over the measures to be taken and the policy to be adopted towards the British.” This according to Rainer Jerosch was no less revolutionary that caste and religious differences, which are highly explosive issues in India even today, did not seem to be assigned much importance by her. In fact, Jerosch has gone so far as to say that her form of government already anticipated important elements which would be contained in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution of January 26, 1950.²¹ Malleson says, “she proved herself a most capable ruler. Possessing considerable personal attractions, young, vigorous and not afraid to show herself to the multitude, she gained a great influence over the hearts of the people. She treated her subjects and inferiors with a friendly dignity which while it repelled familiarity, subdued even the rudest of the soldiers.”²²

Rani Lakshmbai thus became a modern secular icon of the newly independent fledgling nation that found in her a reason to take pride in its sovereignty and multi-religious, multi-lingual and multicultural ethnic diversity. For all her manly flourishes, Rani Lakshmbai took pride in her womanhood and maintained her feminine dignity. While she appealed to the patriarchal concept of being a woman who required to draw certain lines and maintain decorum when it came to both her private and public conduct, she appeared as a protector and custodian of a besieged and vulnerable population. This was not just because she carried forward her husband’s kingly duties but, over a period of time, won for herself the trust and love of her subjects without whose help she could not have thwarted the attempts of a relative Sadashiv Rao to usurp the throne.

Rani Lakshmbai was an erudite modern woman who used her wisdom to tackle any unfavourable situation and resorted to, if required, any and all forms of appeal or threat as the situation warranted. While her presence of mind is worth praising given the extreme conditions of stress all around her, she did not hesitate to use every tactic possible to convince the British that her subjects were very happy to have her as their ruler. She reminded them that her deceased husband and now she ensured all conveniences for the British. Furthermore, she insisted that she would not give up her kingdom. She emphatically denied her role in the massacre of the British in Jokhan Bagh and refused to admit that she was aiding the mutineers. All this took place while the rebels were at her doorstep threatening her to either comply with their demands or be slaughtered and dishonoured. But as always, she did nothing that

²¹ Jerosch, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

²² Malleson and Kay, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 62.

could have further endangered either her own self or her subjects. Jerosch remarks, “Defenceless and vulnerable, she faced a diffused underworld ruled by all conceivable forms of vicious, murderous demons rising like a tide and rendering all wisdom and experience useless.”²³ Even in the face of such a reign of terror she did not once lose her dignity. She was as noble while dealing with such situations as she was while negotiating with the British and even when granting them audience.

There are, of course, varying reports from the British. While her English contemporaries have called her “ardent, daring, licentious woman, an Indian Jezebel, upon whose head rested the blood of the slain and whose relentless cruelty to the Europeans in her city cried out for vengeance”, there is also Sir Robert Hamilton, the British agent for Central India who found the Rani “very civil and polite, and quite the lady.” Major Malcolm, the Agent of the governor general in charge of the region of Bundelkhand, regarded the Rani to be of a very high character and who was much respected by everyone in Jhansi. Another Britisher remarked, “She’s a wonderful woman, very brave and determined. It is fortunate for us that the men are not all like her.”²⁴

Rani Lakshmibai cannot be dismissed as someone who under duress adopted the role of a warrior queen. She was trained in battle but she did not hesitate to resort to tactics other than just military. When required she would feign weakness, or inability or helplessness. These tools were applied in the initial negotiations with the British where we get to see her diplomatic prowess as well. It was something that unnerved even the British. For a good three years ever since the threat of the annexation of the Jhansi by Lord Dalhousie became quite real, Lakshmibai carried out an exchange with Fort William relentlessly. On the one hand, she drafted letters that were “meticulous and precise” and on the other she kept the British on tenterhooks, refusing to draw her pension, or threatening to leave for Benaras and occasionally crying out “*Meri Jhansi nahin doongi.*” (I will not give up my Jhansi).²⁵ She did not hesitate to call a spade a spade and once she remarked in the presence of a British officer Major Gordon that the latter wished her to go away. According to Hamilton, the Rani was easy in manner and conversation and talked very cleverly and clearly, creating the impression that she was a clever strong minded woman, well able to argue. She even hired an English lawyer at one point to put forth her case before the British but was disappointed with him and eventually drafted the letters herself.

²³ Jerosch, op. cit., p. 59.

²⁴ Jerosch, op. cit., p. 6.

²⁵ Jerosch, op. cit., p. 68.

She kept the British on their toes and for most part unnerved and guessing her next move. The British had not dealt with a woman ruler woman on a diplomatic platform who could match them word for word. She broke new ground. Maharani Lakshmibai represents the cult of women who never give up even in the face of certain death. Her controversial role in India's First War of Independence continues to spark raging debates even today. More than 160 years later, she continues to be considered the epitome of courage and a symbol of female heroism. She also was a loving mother, an excellent diplomat, and a symbol of resistance. Joyce Lebra-Chapman has perhaps best defined her role in the modern Indian context: "She (Rani Lakshmibai) became a potent political symbol, a symbol that is being reinterpreted in fresh ways even today."²⁶

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²⁶ Joyce Lebra-Chapman, *The Rani of Jhansi: A Study of Female Heroism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), p. x.