

HISTORY lends itself to legends. This might be because history in its ancient origins grew out of legends. Heroes and heroines of ancient legends (the *Puranas* in India) are not flesh-and-blood humans. They belong to mythical time and perform feats far beyond the abilities of ordinary human beings. It is easy to write off such evocative descriptions in our epics as poetic licence or as a flight of the poet's imagination. The task is not that easy with real historical individuals who lived in real secular time and engaged themselves in real tasks. Many such individuals get endowed with the halo of a hero or a heroine. Their lives and deeds become the subject of popular legends, songs and stories. In India, those who are seen to have sacrificed their lives for the country's freedom quickly become recipients of the reverence for heroes. Freedom fighters have an automatic pass to enter the hallowed national pantheon. It then becomes a sacrilege, almost an act of treason, to re-evaluate such national figures.

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi is one such individual. She died fighting British troops during the uprising of 1857. This and the fact that she was the only woman to have provided leadership to the rebels has given to her memory a special aura. Historians of a nationalist persuasion have all contributed to this elevation of Rani Lakshmibai. But the myth surrounding Lakshmibai needs to be critically examined. (See facing page)

To begin with the bare facts, she was called Manikarnika by her parents. Her beginnings were humble: her father, Moropant Tambe, was a part of Chimnaji Appa's retinue and lived in Benares. The name Manikarnika suggests that Lakshmibai was born in Benares. Her date of birth, however, is not known. She was married to Gangadhar Rao,

HISTORY

The Reluctant Rebel

Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi

Rudrangshu Mukherjee

the ruler of Jhansi, a small Maratha principality in Bundelkhand. A day before his death, Gangadhar adopted a minor son and vested the administration of the state to his widow. The British government under the annexing zeal of Lord Dalhousie decided

to seize this opportunity and annex the state of Jhansi on the pretext that British rule would be good for the state and its people. The Rani was given a life pension of Rs 60,000 and was allowed to live in the city palace. When the decision to annex Jhansi was



Portrait of Rani Jhansi painted by an artist who knew her

The Rani of Jhansi

These are extracts from Subhadrakumari Chauhan's celebrated poem on Rani Jhansi which is an integral part of most Hindi textbooks for school children. The poem is typical of the mythology built around Rani Lakshmibai during the freedom movement, as a popular symbol of revolt against the British. It has played an important role in keeping the legend alive.

*The throne was shaken,
it got the empire worried,
for the old land of Bharat
had got a new lease on youth.
One and all had realised
the value of freedom lost.
And had resolved in their hearts
to throw out the firinghee.*

*In eighteen fifty-seven
the old sword glistened.
This is the story we heard
from the lips of balladeers,
that she fought like a man,
the Rani of Jhansi....*

*She was Durga, she was Lashmi
She was herself valour incarnate.
Marathas were thrilled
to see her swordplay.
Mock wars, battle arrays, wild hunts,
Laying siege to and wrecking forts -
These were her favourite fun and games....*

*Good fortune shown;
Bright light flooded
Her locked palaces,
But Time, moving silently,
Brought on dark clouds,
For it does not relish
Bangles on the hand that shoots arrows.
The Rani was widowed, alas!
Fate too was relentless....*

*The Rajah died childless;
The Rani was forlorn in grief.
This is the story we heard
from the lips of the balladeers,
that she fought like a man,
the Rani of Jhansi....*

*Let's now move
to the battlefield of Jhansi,
where Lakshmibai took her stand,
like a man among men.*

*Lt. Walker came leading the march.
The Rani pulled out her sword
but it was an unequal fight.
Walker ran away wounded,
he was astounded.
This is the story we heard
from the lips of the balladeers,
that she fought like a man,
the Rani of Jhansi....*

*The Rani went through
the enemy forces
slashing her way.
She now came across a stream,
it was a deadly crisis.
The horse, an untried one
balked.
In the meantime,
mounted infantrymen arrived.
The Rani was alone
and her enemies were many
and she was repeatedly attacked.*

*She fell down wounded,
the lioness who was fated
to meet a hero's death.
This is the story we heard
from the lips of balladeers
that she fought like a man,
the Rani of Jhansi....*

*The Rani passed on
riding the divine pyre.
Light merged into light,
the light was truly her.
She was barely twenty-three,
but she was no human,
she was an incarnation;
She was Lady Liberty who came
to breathe life into us.*

*She showed us the way
she came to teach us.
This is the story we heard
from the lips of the balladeers,
that she fought like a man,
the Rani of Jhansi.*

Subhadrakumari Chauhan
(Translated by J.P. Das)

communicated to her, she apparently declaimed “*Meri Jhansi nahin dungi*” but there was no resistance offered to the British takeover.

Like in the other states the British annexed in the 19th century, British rule began on the wrong foot in Jhansi by riding roughshod over the sentiments of the Indian people. The British government resumed the villages assigned to the temple of Mahalakshmi, the deity of the royal family. It allowed cow slaughter, which had been prohibited in the town of Jhansi. It refused the Rani money for her son’s sacred thread from the trust left by Gangadhar Rao. The people of Jhansi and the Rani herself thus had enough reasons to be disaffected with the British. In a very vital sense the grievances of the people and the personal grievance of Lakshmibai were inseparable. The *izzat* of the Rani was tied to the honour of Jhansi and its people. Insult inflicted upon her was an insult on Jhansi. Similarly, a dishonour done to the people of Jhansi also reflected on the ruler.

The uprising in Jhansi began amongst the sepoys in the beginning of June with the news that sepoys in other stations had mutinied. The actions of the sepoys followed the characteristic features of popular insurgency as had been witnessed in other north Indian towns. There was sacking, looting and arson, all directed towards the symbols of British authority, the government buildings, the jail and the bungalows. The *thakurs* of the surrounding countryside also joined in the insurgency and Jhansi passed out of British control. The English took refuge in the fort with

little or no supplies. The 61 English men, women and children who had taken refuge in the fort surrendered, but were still massacred. There was no doubt that the killing was carried out by the sepoys according to a well-arranged plan.

It is instructive to note some of the Rani’s actions during this period without raising the thorny issue of whether she was a part of the conspiracy and the massacre. The rebels set off for



An example of contemporary poster art

Delhi on June 12. That very day Lakshmibai wrote to Major W.C. Erskine, commissioner and agent, lieutenant governor, Sagar Division. The letter read: “The govt. forces stationed at Jhansie, through their faithlessness, cruelty and violence killed all the European civil and military officers, the clerks and all their families and the Ranee not being able to assist them for want of guns and soldiers...the

mutineers afterwards behaved with much violence against herself and extorted a great deal of money from her and said that as the Ranee was entitled to succeed to the *riyasat* she should undertake the management since the sepoys were proceeding to Delhi to the King. That her dependence was entirely on the British authorities... the sepoys knowing her to be quite helpless sent her messages thro’ the *teheseldar* of Jhansie the Revenue and Judicial seristadars...to the effect that if she at all hesitated to comply with their requests they would blow up her palace with guns. Taking into consideration her position she was obliged to consent to all the requests made...she is in continual dread of her own life and that of the inhabitants.”

In a second letter written on the 14th, Lakshmibai again spoke of her helplessness and her inability, given the turbulence and recalcitrance all around her, to preserve peace. This most emphatically is not the voice of a rebel. It reads almost like a *cahier de doléances*, a catalogue of harm done with a plea for help.

Yet it cannot be denied that the Rani did turn a rebel. The removal of British power in Jhansi left Lakshmibai in a helpless situation. Without guns and resources she was in no position to restore peace and stability in the region. The disaffections against British rule which had been growing now expressed themselves in open warfare. Relatives of the Rani who had envied the power that Gangadhar Rao had vested in her also began to conspire against her. The steadfast refusal of the British authorities to

reply to any of her letters and to send any help probably convinced her that the British held her to be guilty of conspiracy and of masterminding the massacre.

This last fear was well-founded. The British belief that she had given sepoy's guns pointed to her complicity in their eyes. The massacre also called for vengeance which was the commonest emotion among the British authorities in the summer and autumn of 1857. In the circumstances Lakshmibai came to be labelled the "Jezebel of India" by the British. Despite this, the Rani continued to appeal to the British and hold the area on their behalf. A report dated 8 January, 1858, informs us that the *darogah* of the Jhansi jail asked the Rani if she would fight against the English. The Rani said she would return all the districts under her to the British officers when they came to Jhansi. Her loyalty to the British is thus clear: she was holding Jhansi for the British and was certain the British would come back to power.

By early 1858 it became clear that the counter-insurgency measures of the British in north India were successful beyond rebel and even British expectations. Except for Awadh, one of the major theatres of popular resistance, the rest of the Gangetic plain had seen the restoration of British rule. Sir Hugh Rose began to move in to Bundelkhand and advance towards Jhansi by the end of February 1858. By this time Lakshmibai's options were closed. She could submit to Rose and be convicted dishonourably as a rebel and a murderer of innocent people. Or she could preserve her honour and fight with the rebels. The choice was obvious. She died fighting.

In the case of Lakshmibai the lines of loyalty and rebellion were not



Battle scene from the mutiny of 1857

clear-cut. She was loyal to Jhansi and believed for a long time that the cause of Jhansi would be best served by maintaining ties with the British. But popular pressure all around her was in the other direction: to oppose British rule and to obliterate all signs of that rule from Jhansi. Forsaken by the British and condemned by them as a murderer on the basis of no evidence except racial hatred and threatened by an insurgent populace that wanted her to assume leadership, the Rani was at best a reluctant rebel. A

far cry from an automatic choice into the pantheon of natural heroes.

The uprising of 1857 saw racial passions of an intensity not seen in India before or since. In north India any *firanghi* was an enemy and a target. Hatred brooked very few compunctions of age or gender. Similarly, for the British counter-insurgency forces driven by the desire for vengeance, every native was a rebel. Lakshmibai was seen as a rebel but because of her gender she was calumnied as something more. J.Lang, who was the only Britisher who saw her face to face, left the following description of her: "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... The expression also was very good and very intelligent. The eyes were particularly fine and the nose very delicately shaped... 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." The male gaze is stark in the passage



especially in the lines about her figure. Those lines contain the suggestion, tucked away in an innocent factual remark, of a full-blooded woman. The suggestion when combined with racial hatred became a full-blown accusation of somebody “given to intemperance”. The phrase was a Victorian euphemism for promiscuity. G.W. Forrest removed such veils of apparent decency and wrote, “The Ranee of Jhansi was an ardent, daring licentious woman.” A rebel

woman could have no moral standards. She had to be reduced to a whore.

In the extraordinary polarity of a viceless national hero and a promiscuous rebel we have probably lost the human being. A human being caught in very troubled times; a human being who had no training to handle public affairs or the crises that circumstances drew her into. In a world completely dominated by men she

tried valiantly in the best way she could to save her honour, the honour of Jhansi, and do the best according to what she thought was the best for her subjects. The idea of heroism was probably unknown to her. Her helplessness made her a heroine. By glorifying her we gloss over the pains, indecisions and agonies she possibly had to suffer as a woman with responsibilities which in 19th century India were considered to be male. □

The Hidden Agendas in Literacy Primers

A Report from West Bengal

Sandip Bandyopadhyay

GENDER sensitisation is now a catch-phrase among social action groups, and the state has lost no time in co-opting it. Of course, in its own way. Along with the constant refrains of secularism, national integration and national sovereignty, equal status for women has also become a routine slogan. The approach is didactic, based on the supposition that ignorance is at the root of gender discrimination, and hence the need for education. Men should be taught that women are not inferior to the male population.

This top-down approach permeates the entire cultural gamut of literacy primers in West Bengal. Meant for adult learners, the primers¹ are now being used in the literacy programmes of the National Literacy Mission (NLM). The primers were prepared by the Bengal Social Service League, which is also the State Resource Centre.

Reading the primers, one has the impression that the authors have mindlessly followed NLM stipulations. The NLM hoped that persons attaining functional literacy would

imbibe the values of women’s equality (along with others such as national integration and environment conservation) and would also learn to follow small family norms. One can



Cover page of one of NLM books

easily discern where the catch lies. The issue of women's equality has been cleverly equated with that of population control. In the case of West Bengal primers, the latter actually takes precedence over the former. The following are extracts from the primers:

“Sons and daughters are equal; in what sense is a daughter inferior?” (Step I, p.4)

“Big family is a menace; it demands that you enhance your income.” (I:6)

“(Let us hope) men and women will be equal. Sons and daughters will be at par with each other” (I:16)

“It is better to keep a family small. Too many children create problems; they will lack proper meals and suffer from diseases frequently.” (I:48)

“Misfortune overtakes a family that has too many children.” (II:20)

“It is easier to give birth to a child. It is not so easy to bring him/her up.” (II:17)

The aim is obviously to ‘teach’ small family norms, along with a dose of women's equality. Learners have no freedom to probe the issue on their own. The lessons and their following questions fail to stimulate any meaningful dialogue, and only reiterate what has already been said. Lesson 4 in Step I is titled “Sons and Daughters Are Equal” and the following words are written for a mother: “Who says my daughter is inferior! I shall educate her and must not marry her off at an early age.” These words do not emanate from a woman's realisation. They are given to her and she is supposed to bear them in mind. The very first lesson in Step I refers to an unhappy family where “husband and wife do not consult each other on important issues”. Learners are not encouraged to discuss the reason for their unhappiness. The cause is given;

the solution is also given, with no room for close interaction between the teacher and the learner. This tendency to impose set views and notions pervades the entire set of primers. It is a naggingly pedantic approach which does not conform to the spirit of non-formal learning.

It is not only that the lessons do not motivate learners to question

reality, they are also full of conventional modes of thinking. Take for example the following passage: “Days have changed now. Girls now also keep up the family's prestige. They are also looking after their parents and earning money. We shall be wrong to discriminate between a son and a daughter.” (I:48).

The underlying notion is clear:



Bias permeates even non-governmental educational efforts

girls should not be neglected because they may also add to the family's social prestige and economic status. Women, according to this paradigm, are not inherently worthy in their own right. To say that women should not be neglected because they may also earn money and prestige for the family is to locate their status in their value to the family, and thus deny them their rights as individual human beings.

This is also discernible in the way the issue of population control has been treated. The emphasis is rightly on the mother's health, which is affected by frequent pregnancies. But neither the lesson nor the accompanying questions propose that women have rights over their bodies. Nor is there any caution given against the available birth-control measures, which often have negative effects upon women's health.

The question of a mother's health is dealt with elaborately in a lesson in Step II. Titled "Why Nishi Died", it is the story of a poor tribal woman who died because she had too many children. This is conveyed to the bereaved husband by a village leader at a public meeting, where the leader asks the guilty husband: "Stand up, say, how many children have you?" The husband in the dock says "Five" and the leader goes on to teach him how his irresponsible behaviour brought about his wife's death: "Had you been content with one or two children, your wife wouldn't have died, understand?"

The lesson is outrageous, to say the least. The leader speaks in a condescending tone and never cares to consider that he is talking to a man who has just lost his wife. There is no reference made to the exploitative system, and only the husband is held responsible for the wife's undernourishment. More reprehensibly, the

lesson creates a false notion that poor people suffer because they beget too much, and therefore the problem of poverty can be resolved by controlling population.

The lessons on women's equality actually parrot the mainstream media's advertisements on family planning. No attempt is made to grasp the issue's complexity and there is practically no recognition of the emerging question of women's rights. The lessons also overlook other forms of gender discrimination and only end up in preaching some platitudes approved by the State. This approach

blunts the edges of the problem and in effect distorts it.

Ironically, the message intended to be conveyed to the people, we may be sure, will never reach them. Pedagogical experience confirms that adult education, if it is not problem-posing and thought-provoking, serves no purpose. It may impose a set of alien values, cultures and notions; but imposed as they are, people won't take much time to forget them.

¹The primers are: *Saksharatar Pratham Path, Switiya Path, Tiritiya Path (Steps towards Literacy, I - III)* □

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