

I believe in the maxim *Satyameva jyate* (Truth alone triumphs) and am therefore all for stripping of myths about historical figures. But then I also expect that what is revealed is a truer vision of reality and not some half truths and woolly conclusions. These are worse than myths. The article under the heading of history titled “Reluctant Rebel” on the Rani of Jhansi by Mr. R. Mukherjee, published in **Manushi** 87 is, in my opinion, a good illustration of this kind. In support of his argument and conclusion the writer has named only two sources and two letters. The two letters are open to another type of interpretation and the two sources are flimsy. One is of Mr J. Lang about the person of the Rani — perhaps covered in a nine-yard sari in Marathi style that prominently displays feminine legs, which would be abhorrent to a Victorian prude. The *daroga* quote can hardly be considered reliable. I wish Mr. Mukherjee had quoted his other main sources, if any.

1857 shocked the British as never before. A very large number of books, eyewitness accounts exist; even in remote Canada, I was quickly able to pull out six books from a local library. Two of them dealt with the Jhansi sector and are well researched. The first, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857*, published in 1898, is by Colonel G.B. Malleson C.S.I. who served in India in the crucial years. He kept copious notes and returned again to consult his native Indian friends in 1880 when the dust had settled down. The second, *Battles of the Indian Mutiny*, published in 1963, is by Michael Edwardes, who had access to military and India office records that were declassified by that time. The third book in Marathi (reprinted in 1957), is titled *My Journey in 1857* from my library of Marathi books. It is the record of the travels of an erudite priest (*dashgranthi*

brahmin) Godse Shastri, who travelled to the north to earn money to pay off family debts, as he learned that Bayajabai Shinde of Gwalior was to perform a *yajna*. He was at the Jhansi court as an honoured priest, was present in the siege of Jhansi, and went into hiding when the British ravaged the city, looting and killing all men older than 8 years and below 80 years. After escaping from Jhansi, he met the Rani again on the way to Kalpi and spent some time with her. He was an intelligent, humane observer, and had access to the Rani. Through all these books, but particularly that of Malleson and of Godse Shastri, Lakshmibai comes very much alive as a human being and seems hardly like a reluctant rebel. Malleson mentions her



The Rani of Jhansi

Not a Reluctant Rebel

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as one of the chief conspirators along with Maulavi Ahmad-ullah of Faizabad and Nansahib Peshwa who were in cahoots before the explosion of 1857 (p.33).

Mr. Mukherjee’s beginning “with bare facts” hardly looks factual. That she was named Manikarnika suggests to him that she was born in Benares. What a tenuous connection! One of my aunts was named Manikarnika (and like Lakshmibai was called Manu for short) and she went nowhere within 500 miles of Benares. There is a Hindi saying “*Aankh ka andhaa, naam Nayansukh.*” He mentions that her father Moropant Tambay was in the retinue of Chimnaji Appa at Benares. The well known Chimnaji Appa, younger brother of Bajirao the First, who had successfully ousted the Portuguese from Tarapur Fort against all odds, was dead a long time ago. If it was any other Chimnaji Appa, Mr. Mukherjee should have mentioned it. In any case, the place of the Rani’s birth is not important. What is important is that Lakshmibai was a childhood companion of the sons of Peshwa Bajirao the Second, one of whom, Nanasahib, was a leading figure of the war of 1857. Bajirao and his family were sent to Bithur near Kanpur by the British after Marathas surrendered to the British in 1818.

The next portion of the same paragraph gives the impression that Jhansi was an independent kingdom

because Mr. Mukherjee records that despite her alleged brave words, she offered no resistance when Dalhousie annexed it. The fact is that from 1818, the British had replaced the Peshwa as overlords over all lands that were under their suzerainty. Under a treaty, the Jhansi ruler had accepted the British as overlords with an annual tribute of Rs 74,000 to be given to them. In return, the British had declared his title and position to be hereditary. But the British could do pretty much as it pleased them. For example, in 1838, when the claim of Baba Gangadhar Rao, Lakshmibai's husband, to the kingdom was accepted, the British agent had even taken over the administration. It was returned to the Raja in 1843. When Baba died in 1854, Dalhousie decided that the adopted son had no claim as the British guarantee of hereditary rule did not extend to those in whose veins the blood of the founder of the dynasty did not flow. He ordered lapsing of Jhansi to the paramount power. Malleon describes the event and what the Rani did. The following quotes are taken from pp. 32, 258 and 259 of his book. He writes, "She was largely gifted, possessed great energy, had borne, up to the period upon which I am entering, 'a high character', much respected by everyone at Jhansi. But the hand of the despoiler had lashed her into a fury which was not to be governed... In vain, did the Rani dwell upon the services which in the olden days the rulers of Jhansi had rendered to the British Government and quote acknowledgments made by the Government. Lord Dalhousie was not to be moved. With a stroke of pen, he deprived this high spirited woman of the rights which she believed and which all natives of India believed to be hereditary. The stroke of pen converted the lady of so high a character and so much respected into

a veritable tigress so far as the English were concerned... Powerless, she nursed her resentment, until the revolt of Mirath and the seizure of Delhi gave her the long wished for opportunity. She then, in June 1857, gained to her cause the *sipahis* stationed at Jhansi, enticed the English officers and their families to accept her protection and had them foully murdered. On the 9th of June, she caused herself to be proclaimed Rani of Jhansi."

I do not know what Mr. Mukherjee means when he says "she offered no resistance to the British takeover". The British were overlords in Jhansi for a long time before Lakshmibai and like an astute statesman she had to protest and bide for time and opportunity. The two letters dated June 12th and 14th, 1858, referred to by Mr. Mukherjee, should be seen in the light of what Malleon has stated. They do not strike me as *cahiers du doleances* at all. She was protesting to the British that it was their actions that had led to the killing of the English at Jhansi. Had they not deprived her of her rightful status and arms, she would have had the means to avoid these murders.

Godse Shastri makes no reference to any proclamation about Lakshmibai declaring herself Rani of Jhansi. His account varies from Malleon in respect of the killings and despatch of the mutineers by her on their way to Delhi. He lays the blame on the mutineer *sipahis* for the murders; the Rani would have nothing to do with the rabble. She got rid of them by giving them money to proceed to Delhi and continued her negotiations with the main conspirators with Taty Topay (Tantia Topi as mentioned in history books) as a go-between.

In further support of his contention, Mr. Mukherjee refers to a report dated January 8, 1858. He does not say who

filed it. Anyway, according to this report, the Daroga of the Jhansi jail asked the Rani if she would fight against the English; she replied that she would return all the districts under her to the British officers when they came to Jhansi. According to Mr. Mukherjee, this report establishes her loyalty to the British; she was holding Jhansi for the British and was certain that the British would come back to power. Why then did she fight valiantly when a seasoned diplomat and a veteran of the Crimean war, Hugh Rose, besieged Jhansi? Was it because she had no option left? "Forsaken by the British and condemned by them as a murderer... and threatened by an insurgent populace that wanted her to assume leadership, the Rani was at best a reluctant rebel," says Mr Mukherjee.

This report is the flimsiest evidence. It needs to be taken — not with a pinch but a lot of salt. From June 1857 to April 4, 1858, Lakshmibai was ruling Jhansi, carrying out negotiations with fellow conspirators, strengthening her army and fort, for a war which she knew would soon descend on her, and governing an area of 1608 square miles and a population of 25 lakh. That she should be confiding about her real intentions of guarding British interests to a minor official, especially when the uprising was a popular cause, seems incredible. I am surprised that Mr Mukherjee considers it of any significance. And where was the question of the British forsaking her? In order to forsake, one has first to be accepted. Right from the time her husband died, entrusting the administration of the kingdom to her, she had been at loggerheads with the British. Not only did they annex Jhansi, but they also put extraordinary and unjust curbs on her, even with regard to her family duties. Mr. Mukherjee has

mentioned the refusal of the British to give her funds out of the trust left by her husband for her son's thread ceremony. Godse Shastri mentions that they did not even allow her to go to Kashi to perform the final rites for her dead husband. He describes how hard it was for a woman like her (he uses the adjective *tejswini*) to put up with such insults. They deigned not even to reply to her letters. To talk about the British forsaking her is therefore pointless.

Was it the threat of the insurgent populace that stirred her? All the three sources I have quoted show that inspiration flowed from the Rani who had excellent leadership qualities. Malleson writes about the Jhansi fort which Rose set out to reconnoissance before engaging in battle. "The strength of the fort struck him as remarkable. Standing on an elevated rock, built by massive masonry, with guns peeping from every elevation, it commanded the country far and near...It was surrounded by a massive wall from six to eight feet thick varying in height from 18 to 30 feet having numerous flanking bastions armed as batteries and was garrisoned by 11,000 men commanded by a woman who possessed all the instincts, all the courage, all the resolutions of a warrior of the type so well known in consular Rome." He then writes about the battle that waged for 17 days, in which "without intermission, shot and shell were rained on the besieging force." He records "It was evident that the Rani has infused some of her lofty spirit into her compatriots. Women and children were seen assisting in the repair of the havoc made in the defences by the fire of the besiegers and in carrying food and water to the soldiers on duty." (p.388). Edwardes too talks about the spirited defence of Jhansi under her leadership. The breaches made in the wall were quickly

repaired. Only the treachery of a person in Rani's camp showed the British the place from which they could bring down a bastion and blow the armoury where gunpowder was kept in the fort. Godse Shastri, who was present in the fort, marveled at her courage, her capacity for hard work, and the trust which the soldiers and people had in her. He talks of the dream she had during the siege. His eyewitness account of the way Jhansi fought is very moving. These portraits hardly look like a reluctant rebel.

The only time this high spirited woman broke down and wondered why she, a widow, should have engaged in these activities, is recorded by Godse Shastri. At midnight on April 4, 1858, with a band of soldiers, she had ridden out of the fort with her son tied on her back with a *shela*, the family deity, and a silver drinking glass. On way to Kalpi, her monthly period started. She was wearing a soldier's clothing and had no change of clothes. Her embarrassment and helplessness in that situation brought on the bout of regret. She recovered from it and died a hero's death at Kota ki Sarai on 17 June 1858.

Mr. Mukherjee in his concluding, typically male chauvinistic remarks, is very condescending. He refers to her as "a human being who had no training to handle public affairs or the crises that circumstances drew her into." Let me quote Edwardes who writes about her astuteness and foresight which he considers far better than that of her male colleagues. After the fall of Jhansi, the rebels had regrouped themselves in Gwalior. The ruler Shinde had run away as he did not wish to side with the rebels. Money was taken from state treasury to pay soldiers and celebrate proclamation of Nanasahib as the next Peshwa, in the hope that the Maratha chieftains would join him. The Rani of Jhansi was rather less sanguine. She

knew from her experience that Rose would probably march immediately upon Gwalior, and she tried to persuade the rebel leaders to make preparations for the coming British attack. They appeared to be more interested in letting off fireworks and posturing about the Maratha revival (p.180). I wish Mr. Mukherjee had read a little more from different sources, assessed their worth before making disparaging remarks about a revered national figure as a helpless being, buffeted by circumstances. Godse Shastri's shrewd observations about the arguments in a *vidwan sabha* that he attended come to my mind. He says some try to gain respect (*pratishta*) by besmirching (*kucheshtha*) others. I am not saying that this is what Mr. Mukherjee had set out to do. But he should have built his case on a sound footing. With such poor evidence, I am quite happy to wallow in the so called myth, and am glad that Subhadra Devi's poem and the Marathi *powada* of a *shair* of the 19th century continue to stir young hearts and make us all feel proud that in India we had a woman like the Rani of Jhansi. □