

Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi:  
A Study in Indian Patriotic Memory

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## Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi: A Study in Indian Patriotic Memory

Since the national Indian Independence movement of the 1940s, the Sepoy Mutiny has been ubiquitous as a romantic nationalist symbol. Among those immortalized by the Sepoy Mutiny is Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, queen of the city of Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh. Her holding, passed on by her late husband, was threatened by British rule under ascendancy laws.<sup>1</sup> Due to her tenuous position, Lakshmi Bai eventually joined the Indian rebels, becoming a recognizable heroine in folk tales and British imagination alike. Her image, formed by the Indian Independence movement of the 1940s, has many fictional iterations. Most, if not all, of these iterations mistake her as a driven Indian patriot when that is not actually the case.

To understand why Lakshmi Bai was and is thought of as an Indian patriot, the historiography of the rebellion itself comes into play. The nationalist and socialist retellings of the Indian Rebellion often portray it as an organized, precedented revolt. It is seen as the culmination of decades of unrest, mistrust, and British overreach.<sup>2</sup> While this view may be true, the conclusion that since the rebellion was the culmination of cultural unrest it must have been righteous, well-organized, and patriotic is nonetheless flawed. This view is held by such esteemed historians as S.N. Sen and K.K. Datta, both of whom were commissioned by the Indian government on the centenary of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 to write a patriotic history of the movement.<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to this outright nationalistic view of the rebellion, the “subaltern” movement of historians emerged during the 1970s. The subaltern movement prided itself on honesty,

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<sup>1</sup> James Frey, *The Indian Rebellion 1857-1859: A Short History with Documents* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2020), 17

<sup>2</sup> Frey, *The Indian Rebellion 1857-1859*, 83-84

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

nuance, and a rejection of romantic politicization of otherwise complex history. Notable historians from this era are R.C. Majumdar and E.I. Brodtkin.<sup>4</sup>

R.C. Majumdar criticized the politicization of the history of the rebellion, instead arguing that many insurgents revolted due to feudal or regional interests. They were not, to Majumdar, freedom fighters in the typical sense. Their lack of centralized authority due to discordant motivations, moreover, led to chaotic personnel problems that would not otherwise arise.<sup>5</sup>

E.I. Brodtkin likewise proposed that the use of terms such as “rebel” and “loyalist” are unhelpful for actually understanding the conflict. This reflects the growing depoliticization of Indian history that took place throughout the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> James Frey’s short work *The Indian Rebellion 1857-1859: A Short History With Documents* deviates from both these historiographical traditions and proposes a nuanced view of the rebellion.

The 1970s introduced the conflict between these “subaltern” and “nationalist” strains of Indian historiography. The perception of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, like the rest of the rebellion, went through phases, culminating in the modern romanticized view of her as a “valorous warrior-queen.”<sup>7</sup> The motivation behind Lakshmi Bai’s mutiny remains often obscured by contemporary perceptions of her, as either the patriotic Indian monarch or as traitor to the British who she had before been loyal to. As it is in most cases of polarized and romanticized historical figures, the truth of Lakshmi Bai’s motivations for rebellion lies somewhere within the center.

As the women’s historian Indrani Sen, in her 2007 review of fictional representations of Lakshmi Bai records, “[T]he colonial imagination was fascinated by the image of the fearless

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<sup>4</sup> Darshan Perusek, “Subaltern Consciousness and Historiography of Indian Rebellion of 1857,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 3 (September 1993): 1931-1936

<sup>5</sup> Frey, *The Indian Rebellion 1857-1859*, 85

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Indrani Sen, “Inscribing the Rani of Jhansi in Colonial 'Mutiny' Fiction,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 19 (May 2007): 1755

warrior queen. Her heroic, larger-than-life image loomed over colonial discursive writings for the next few decades.”<sup>8</sup> In the years following the mutiny, Sen elaborates, the English and American audiences whose heckles were raised against the Indian Rebellion initially eventually found an unlikely heroine in Lakshmi Bai. The story of her stolen throne, her devoted motherhood, and her fearless death propelled her to the forefront of colonial imagination. Her story was told and retold in many novelized iterations.<sup>9</sup>

This fascination turned out to be not limited to the colonial powers. 2019’s *Manikarnika: Queen of Jhansi* details the life of Lakshmi Bai in as much of a colorful and romantic lens as do the novels. Though this colorful lens is not wholly unfounded in reality, as Kaye and Malleon’s 1896 history show with their description of Lakshmi Bai as “young, vigorous ... she gained a great influence over the hearts of the people. It was this influence ... that enabled her to offer a desperate resistance to the British. ... To [her countrymen] she will always be a heroine.”<sup>10</sup> While this account written by British historians is of course not free of bias, Lakshmi Bai’s presence in the culture of Indian resistance is evident. Only a few decades after the Indian Rebellion, Lakshmi Bai had become a folk hero, a huge statue of her on a steed with her son strapped to her back and an upraised sword in her hand becoming a cultural landmark.<sup>11</sup> Her folk-hero presence has maintained into the present day, being now the subject of a blockbuster Bollywood film.

*Manikarnika: Queen of Jhansi* falls into the category of historical film that is less focused on accurately or honestly portraying history, and more on revisiting beloved historical figures with a glamorized and dramatic lens.<sup>12</sup> Though this makes for entertaining watching, to be sure,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1756

<sup>9</sup> Sen, “Inscribing the Rani of Jhansi,” 1755.

<sup>10</sup> Sir John Kaye and Colonel Malleon, *Kaye’s and Malleon’s History of the Indian Mutiny of 1857-8, Vol. I* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1896)

<sup>11</sup> Amita Sinha, *Cultural Landscapes of India: Imagined, Enacted, and Reclaimed* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020): 178

<sup>12</sup> *Manikarnika: Queen of Jhansi*, directed by Kangana Ranaut and Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi (2019: Mumbai, IN: Zee Studios, 2019), Amazon Prime.

*Manikarnika*'s history is deeply flawed. It portrays Lakshmi Bai as an Indian patriot, echoing the nationalist view of her from the 1940s-50s, and ignores the special interests that went into her mutiny. Though it does touch on the reason for her rebellion as being influenced by her son's legacy being torn away by British authority, it adds a layer of patriotism to an otherwise entirely self-interested history.

However, *Manikarnika*'s faults do not extend to the drama of Lakshmi Bai's life. Though she was not patriotic, her appearance, death, and heroic status all made their imprint on British and Indian consciousness. Her character was also brought into account by Hugh Rose, a general of the British army in India. He states, "The Indian Mutiny has produced but one man, and that man was a woman." Additionally, upon her noteworthy appearance and drama of her death, Rose wrote, "The Rani of Jhansi ... was killed in this charge, dressed in a red jacket, red trousers, and white puggery; she wore the celebrated pearl necklace of Scindia which she had taken from his treasury, and heavy gold anklets."<sup>13</sup> This account of her death is reflected in *Manikarnika* in just as much rich detail.

Lakshmi Bai's patriotism was called into question by R.C. Majumdar in the 1970s. He writes that she "had to carry on a fight against her own kinsmen and rival Indian chiefs, and to the very last ... she was yet undecided whether she would fight against the British or make alliance with them."<sup>14</sup> This indecisiveness is not spoken about in either nationalist history or the popular Bollywood adaptations of Lakshmi Bai's life. Neither also are the many petitions she made to the British government to reinstate her on the throne of Jhansi. In fact, Lakshmi Bai hired an Australian lawyer to argue her case in front of the British courts. While her case was denied and ultimately her legal ambitions came to nothing, Lakshmi Bai's willingness to work

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<sup>13</sup> Hugh Rose's Account, Apr. 30, 1858. <http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/rose.html>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

within the British system until the very moment of crisis is not congruent with the portrait of her in *Manikarnika*.

Indeed, many of her petitions to her contemporary, Governor-General Dalhousie, still reside in Indian archives. Written in English, they expound upon the now three generations of loyalty her husband's family afforded the British. As stated in the following passage, she invokes this family loyalty on the behalf of her son (i.e., her husband's adopted son).<sup>15</sup>

The services rendered by the Sheo Rao Bhao, the father of my late husband, to the British [sic] government before its authority in this part of the Country was established are recorded with other State Documents and have been amply rewarded by the unceasing flow of benefits which his family have derived from the acknowledged favour and protection of such a mighty power.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, Lakshmi Bai invokes British inheritance law, stating that her son had been legally adopted by the Raja of Jhansi and that the British were in breach of contract by attempting to annex Jhansi after her husband's death.<sup>17</sup> This is neither excessively traitorous or patriotic, but is instead concerned with her own family line and the line of her husband, her provincial power, and right to self-determination.

Her patriotism, as portrayed in the novels and movie, was ultimate, clearly articulated, and unwavering. In reality, Lakshmi Bai's opinion is difficult to discern in many cases, and she never outright condemned British holding in India. Her focus was much more on Jhansi, on the succession of her throne, and her own power in Uttar Pradesh.

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<sup>15</sup> Frey, *The Indian Rebellion 1857-1859*, 17

<sup>16</sup> Rani Lakshmi Bai to Governor-General Dalhousie, 3 December 1853, trans. Allen Copsey. <http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/feb-16-1854.html>

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

It is true that she did inspire the Indian rebels once she joined, and indeed she did not become a national symbol for nothing. However, the black-and-white, straightforward view of her that is often portrayed in pop culture adaptations is false.

Along with an overly patriotic view of Lakshmi Bai, British historians of the 19th century attempted to erase the atrocities committed by her and in her name in order to justify their admiration of her and her cause. This view was questioned by later British historians such as R. Burn and Patrick Cadell in 1944, who stated in their article for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* that the evidence used to exonerate Lakshmi Bai of her crimes was flimsy and based on hearsay.<sup>18</sup> This not uncommon British view is reflected in those same colonial novels already referenced, most prominently in Philip Meadows Taylor's novel *Seeta*, published in 1872, only thirteen years after the close of the rebellion. Historian Indrani Sen describes him as "valorising" Lakshmi Bai, or ascribing virtue to her that she did not necessarily possess. The evidence for Lakshmi Bai's involvement in the massacre was first properly contested in 1889, in a letter to Damodar Rao, Lakshmi Bai's son, from a man named T.A. Martin. As to her conviction and condemnation by the British public, Martin states, "Your poor mother was very unjustly and cruelly dealt with - and no one knows her true case as well as I do. The poor thing took no part whatsoever in the massacre of the European residents of Jhansi in June 1857."<sup>19</sup> He goes on to explain how Lakshmi Bai aided the survivors of the massacre.

Along with the questionable identity of the author of this letter, it was written in a time (1889, thirty-two years after the events took place) where the effects of its information would have been negligible. However, it reflects the late-19th century romantic view of the Rani.

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<sup>18</sup> R. Burn and Patrick Cadell, "Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* No. 1 (April 1944), 76.

<sup>19</sup> T.A. Martin to Damodar Rao, Aug. 20 1889, trans. Allen Copsey.  
<http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/aug-20-1889.html>

He goes on to state that Lakshmi Bai “took over the affairs of state” after the mutineers left her province “because she knew the English had no real friend but her.”<sup>20</sup> Again, we see the twisting of Lakshmi Bai’s motivation to fit the preference of those who wrote about her. The questionable credibility of T.A. Martin notwithstanding, these letters do align with the vast majority of contemporary accounts of the massacre. Though the massacre was perpetrated by Jhansi sepoys, these sepoys were not acting under the orders of the Rani. Instead, they, as a member of the Jhansi mutineers named Aman Khan stated as he was awaiting execution, “did not consult the Ranee.” Instead, the sepoys who wished to mutiny coerced the unwilling sepoys to do so, and “all went to the palace of the Ranee with loaded guns and demanded assistance and supplies.”<sup>21</sup> This small involvement, though she did “yield and furnish guns, ammunition and supplies,”<sup>22</sup> does not qualify Lakshmi Bai with a leadership or organizational role within the rebellion.

Lakshmi Bai did, however, retain some authority over Jhansi during the initial mutiny even if she did not actively involve herself within it. Those men, women, and children who did not fall victim to the massacre in Jhansi were both safeguarded from the mutineers and held prisoner by the Rani for the duration of the mutiny. As Mrs. Mutlow, the wife of a Queen’s pensioner, relates in her deposition that they were held under guard by the “Ranee,” and that if anyone found them escaping their confines they would be awarded 100 rupees.<sup>23</sup>

This authority extended to the rest of Jhansi, despite the sepoys’ mutiny and the Rani’s inability to fully control their actions. Though this next account is written by Lakshmi Bai and is therefore biased in her favor, it nevertheless suggests, along with corroboration from both Indian

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Aman Khan, Jhansi Mutineer’s Statement, trans. Allen Copsey.  
<http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/sepoy.html>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Mrs. Mutlow’s Statement. <http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/mutlow.html>

and English sources from the same event, that Lakshmi Bai lost control of the rebellion and of Jhansi, did not support the mutiny, and wished for British aid. It is interesting how this attitude changes on her part from now to later on in the rebellion. This incongruity suggests not patriotism but instead self-interest, as her loyalties do not in this instance at least lie with the people of Jhansi but instead with retaining her right to the throne and her power over Jhansi.

After the initial mutiny took place, “the Ranee of Jhansee” sent a missive to Major Erskine of the British military on the 12th of July, saying that the sepoy mutineers “behaved with much violence against herself and servants, and extorted a great deal of money from her, and said that ... she should undertake the management since the Sepoys were proceeding to Delhi.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, we can see that the balance of power in Jhansi remained on the side of the Rani, while for a short time during the beginning of the rebellion the mutineers held temporary sway before moving on to greater altercations in Delhi.

Additionally, Lakshmi Bai in the missive

states that the Govt. forces, stationed at Jhansie [sic], thro’ 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 ... which she very much regrets.<sup>25</sup>

The Rani said that she was unable to defend the British subjects and soldiers stationed in Jhansi. This account of her inability to resist the mutineers in both their rebellion and the proceeding massacre is corroborated by the other two accounts previously examined in this study.

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<sup>24</sup> Rani Lakshmi Bai to Major Erskine, 12 June 1857, trans. Allen Copsey. <http://www.copsey-family.org/~allenc/lakshmibai/june-12-1857.html>

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

While it cannot be reasonably said that Lakshmi Bai was involved in the rebellion due to patriotic interests, it can be asserted that she was not anti-British (at least to begin with). Her own self-interest, then, may also be inferred, as British protection in the area would have secured her safety as the Rani if they so chose to permit her ascendancy.

This is also stated in the letter to Major Erskine that Lakshmi Bai had taken note of the lack of British officers (all of them having been killed) and being concerned for the welfare of the people of Jhansi in the absence of these officers she retained the order of the region through appointing a police force and had them “remain at their posts and perform their duties as usual, she is in continual dread of her own life and that of the inhabitants.”<sup>26</sup> This “dread of her own life” refers to her fear of the rebels, and not of the British soldiers. This should be noted.

While this attitude toward the British changed over time, as Lakshmi Bai did willingly engage in later clashes with the British army, the information seen in these sources does add nuance to the previously more simple view of her as a patriotic warrior fully invested in the rebellion from the very first time the British attempted to annex the region of Jhansi.<sup>27</sup> Though Lakshmi Bai’s interest was in preserving the people and throne of her home, it was not ever as a nationalist warrior as late 19th-century mutiny fiction, 1940s nationalists, and modern Bollywood movies have all represented her.

To cement the Rani’s place as a nationalist and feminist symbol in Indian patriotism, there was a “Rani of Jhansi” regiment in the Indian National Army (a nationalist guerilla force) between 1943 and 1945. This regiment, composed of entirely female guerillas, was dedicated to both the cause and the memory of Lakshmi Bai, finding inspiration in her fight against the British Empire to such a great degree that Captain Swaminathan of the regiment stated they all,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Sen, “Inscribing the Rani of Jhansi,” 1755.

including herself, “forgot [their] sex.”<sup>28</sup> This emulation of the Rani of Jhansi and subsequent romanticization of her story in Indian patriotic memory is accordingly reflected in the previously mentioned 2019 film *Manikarnika: Queen of Jhansi*.

Though the opinion of the British public was turned against Lakshmi Bai due to her supposed involvement in the massacre of innocent men and women in Jhansi, British writers romanticized her image to the point of ignoring the (then convincing) evidence that she had perpetrated the massacre. Though the contemporary evidence refutes this claim, it is significant that British authors were willing to elevate her character against popular opinion. Though it is the job of art and literature historians to speculate why Rani Lakshmi Bai’s image was so potent in the 19th century, it is this study’s intention to establish that the patriotism so often ascribed to her has been inaccurate to her actual intentions.

In the first scene of *Manikarnika* (2019), the infant Lakshmi Bai is described as being an “eternal fire,” the “gem of the gods.” Those around her predict that her name will be remembered throughout history, that she will be a great symbol of her nation, and will remain in the hearts of the Indian people.<sup>29</sup> Though this sequence most likely did not actually take place and is instead the product of the directors’ imagination, it reflects the deep affection for Lakshmi Bai that the Indian people, past and present, have had. It reflects also the preoccupation with a romantic vision of her that both Indian and British writers have expressed.

Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi, was primarily concerned with maintaining her own power and peace within the region of Jhansi. When peace was threatened, she did not immediately land on the side of either the rebels or the British. Instead, she acted fully in her own interest and the

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<sup>28</sup> Carol Hills and Daniel C. Silverman. “Nationalism and Feminism in Late Colonial India: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, 1943-1945,” *Modern Asian Studies* 27, no. 4 (October 1993): 741-744, 746

<sup>29</sup> *Manikarnika: Queen of Jhansi*, directed by Kangana Ranaut and Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi (2019: Mumbai, IN: Zee Studios, 2019), Amazon Prime.

interest of her son. To ascribe greater motivations to Lakshmi Bai is to dismiss her actual life in the interest of a romantic fiction.