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The Making of A *Viraangana*: Lakshmi Bai

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Abstract:

Lakshmi Bai is a *Virangana*—the manifestation of physical form of power or *Shakti*. According to the tradition of the *Virangana*, a *Virangana* is a valiant fighter with great skill in warfare, courage to the extent of risking her life and even dying in battle. She is a leader—general in a state of war and ruler during peace. She is a symbol of virtue, wisdom and defence of her people. She stands for fight against evil and emerges as an alternative female paradigm in a very structured hierarchy of strict male and female boundaries. She is a unique combination of power and virtue—a human personification of the goddess *Shakti* or *Kali* or *Durga*—the vanquisher of evil, riding a vehicle and wielding a weapon for a noble cause.

The paper deals with the concept of *Virangana* and then portrays Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi as the *Virangana* of Pre independence time to enthuse the freedom fighters with new zeal to fight for the freedom of the country and helped women to draw inspiration for the same.

Keywords: Lakshmi Bai, Virangana, war of independence, womanhood, memoir 1857

“The Rani of Jhansi, the Indian Joan of Arc was killed...dressed in red jacket, red trousers and white puggary. She wore the celebrated pearl necklace of Scindia, which she had taken from his treasury, and heavy gold anklets. As she lay mortally wounded in her tent, she ordered these ornaments to be distributed among her troops. It is said that Tantia [Tope] intercepted the necklace. The whole rebel army mourned for her. Her body was burnt with great ceremony under a tamarind tree, under the rock of Gwalior, where I saw her bones and ashes...”

In an era when women were mostly confined to the home and the hearth, Lakshmi Bai, the brave queen of Jhansi stands out as a luminous instance of woman empowerment, strength, confidence and bravery amidst, intrigues, deceits, betrayals and deceptions of the male dominated war struck Indian soil fighting for freedom.

Named as Manikarnika or Manubai, she had lost her mother at the tender age of four and thus was brought up by her father, Moro Pant who taught her hardly realising that his early education is actually a preparation for the grand and challenging future she will face.

Vishnu Bhatt Godse Varsaikar whose first-hand account of the First War of Independence has been the basis of this present study, mentions her being called Chhabili by her loved ones. The book is translated by Mirnal Pande from Marathi to English and is aptly titled *1857*. It is a gripping description of the uprising witnessed by a Chitpavan Brahmin caught in the

political turmoil of the country who had crossed the Vindhayas with his uncle in search of better financial resources to support his family that was in debt.

Lakshmi Bai emerges as a brilliant combination of power and virtue—the archetypical woman as per ancient Indian tradition and Indian mythology. Lakshmi Bai was Kali personified for the freedom fighters who found inspiration in her indomitable courage and strength. Womanhood as per Vedic Culture has been lauded as a creator, sustainer and preserver of life, values, tradition and culture. Womanhood is considered as a divine fragment that God has placed in the world to help the life cycle continue. The feminine form of the divine is *Shakti* or power which is the ultimate creative force as seen in one of the manifestations of Lord Shiva where he is depicted as half man and half woman famously known as *Ardhnareeshwara*. Woman is also known as the *Ardhangini* of a man continuing a similar tradition in the human world where the human Shiva is nothing without the human Parvati. This is the fundamental law of creation. The *Pursha* (male) unites with *Prakrati* (Female) to create the universe. Vedic rituals could not be thus, performed without the feminine form—the woman of the house, the *Shakti* that propels the entire household. Without the woman, only ardhangan was offering a prayer or performing a ritual, which was thus incomplete because the Parvati for was missing. Thus, it was believed that such a prayer would not be accepted as only half of the being has offered it. Even Manu decreed that a mother is to be revered a thousand times more than a father because she manifests the Divine power of creation. He goes on further to assert that where women are honoured the gods are pleased and where women are not given their due reverence the land becomes fruitless and barren.

Talking of gender, Swami Vivekanand also believed that the soul is ultimately without any gender. Thus, in reality there is no male or female permanently. Ironically, it is simply a matter of this one lifetime. *Navratras* or the auspicious nine nights celebrated in this tradition worship *Shakti*, the goddess of creative power in her three prominent forms—*Durga* or *Kali* the destroyer, Lakshmi the harbinger of wealth or the giver and *Saraswati* the one who bestows wisdom. The last day or *Vijayadashmi* is celebrated as a revelation of self after seeking *Shakti* in all its forms.

Rani Lakshmi Bai, during the freedom movement became a symbol of this power or *Shakti*, the trinity of the feminine form to inspire both men and women equally to fight for the freedom of their motherland who herself had turned into a feminine form of Mother India. Lakshmi Bai was the *Durga*—the destroyer of injustice and evil, the epitome of wisdom and virtue like *Saraswati* and the benevolent giver of alms and charity to every Brahmin like Lakshmi. Just as we see five great women in the Vedic age whose names are today symbols of virtuous character, spiritual wisdom and purity of soul like Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Ahilya and Tara; Lakshmi Bai is one of those few women rulers who symbolise strength, virtue and wisdom in the modern age. These women are victimised despite all their virtue yet continue to be sacrificing, loyal and full of fortitude. They form the iconic Indian woman that pervades the collective consciousness of our culture.

Since, I am concentrating on Lakshmi Bai, a warrior queen of the First War of Independence in India, I concentrate on *Shakti*—the divine form of creative power or energy that creates this cosmos. Lakshmi Bai is a *Virangana*—the manifestation of physical form of power or *Shakti*. According to the tradition of the *Virangana*, a *Virangana* is a valiant fighter with great skill in warfare, courage to the extent of risking her life and even dying in battle. She is a leader—general in a state of war and ruler during peace. She is a symbol of virtue, wisdom and defence of her people. She stands for fight against evil and emerges as an alternative female paradigm in a very structured hierarchy of strict male and female boundaries. She is a unique combination of power and virtue—a human personification of the goddess *Shakti* or *Kali* or *Durga*—the vanquisher of evil, riding a vehicle and wielding a weapon for a noble cause.

Ironically, this version of the female *Virangana* is more commonly found in our tribal cultures than in mainstream culture. That is why, these luminous examples in Indian History like Rani Lakshmi Bai, are rare and precious. In fact she became a symbol of inspiration to fight not only colonial rule but colonial sense of superiority. She becomes a symbol of fighting oppressive attitudes against women because of which the British looked down on us. The British looked down upon the Indians because of the oppressive patriarchal attitude reflected in the Purdah system, sati, kulinism etc. The white man took these as pretexts to look down upon brown men considering them as depraved and perverted because of their inferior and inhuman treatment of women.

Combating this racial superiority, social reformers of the 19th century in India, picked these examples like Lakshmi Bai to show that Indian culture gave importance to women and also worked hard to go back to the Vedas and the Upanishads to prove that even in ancient India women had enjoyed a place of vital importance and honour in the society and it is only later that the very people who were light to the world forgot their own rich heritage and culture and got corrupted. This delving in the past and using the *Viranganas* as a symbol served a dual purpose. First, the people were reminded of their rich heritage and that helped them regain their self-respect and faith in their own culture and second, it worked as an inspiration to the freedom fighters. The *Virangana* became such a popular symbol during the freedom struggle that even the country was personified as Mother Goddess or *Bhaarat Mata* in a similar attire and appearance as a *Virangana* or the traditional goddess.

This symbolisation was nothing but a reinforcement of a positive feminine tradition in a male dominated society that had been lost somewhere after Vedic times in the country. Even Gandhiji who was the follower of non-violence felt that women who are by nature nurturing and non-violent can play a pivotal role in the freedom movement and the spread of the virtue of Ahimsa. Gandhiji's standpoint does not coincide with the *Virangana* model of womanhood since he never supported a radical view but he had always supported the empowerment of women even if not in such a radical manner. He does incorporate women in the Quit India Movement and the Salt Satyagrah which began with the march at Dandi. Well, it is needless to say here that just as all men need not turn into models of valour and bravery, all women need not turn into warring women.

Nehru's standpoint is important to quote here who agreed that we are facing a problem and simply glorifying the past is not the solution to the glaring problem of deprivation of women in the present condition. He said in a speech in 1928, "We hear a good deal about Sita and Savitri. They are revered names in India and rightly so, but I have a feeling that these echoes from the past are raised chiefly to hide our present deficiencies and to prevent us from attacking the root cause of women's degradation in India today." Nehru believed that economic bondage had to be broken to empower women and that can happen only if women get out of the confines of their home and hearth to work. The benevolent Rani represents all these qualities through her charismatic persona.

Getting back to the *Viraangana* model, which indeed was exceptional, was well timed and well needed in the country during the 19th century in India, we see that Lakshmi Bai had become a synonym for resistance to the British for people supporting the extremist view like Lala Lajpat Rai, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and even Subhash Chandra Bose who even constituted a separate regiment for women named after her.

If we delve deeper into the life of Lakshmi Bai, we see that destiny was preparing her for the ultimate historic role she was to play later. She grew up playing with her cousin Nana Sahib who later becomes her accomplice in resisting the British and TanyaTope. With no one to take care of her at home, her father brought her to the temple with him as a small child and thus she learnt whatever the boys were learning from their Guru. By the age of 8 or 10 she was good at horse riding, fencing, wrestling, one on one combat, firing guns and everything that the princes were supposed to know and excel at. By the time she had turned 12, the father Moro Pant was frantically worried to find a suitable match for his liberally educated daughter because she would be a misfit in a traditional and orthodox Brahmin family. His search ended with the queer ruler of Jhansi Gangadhar Rao. Queer because many strange stories about his eccentric behaviour were already current that made parents of girls of marriageable age hesitate since no parent in their right frame of mind would think of giving away their daughter to a man who was rumoured to behave like a woman once a month and would not only do that but also observe the ritual of untouchability as menstruating women do.

"It was rumoured that every once in a while, Gangadhar Baba would start behaving like a woman. When the urge struck him, he would suddenly go to the roof of the palace, remove his male attire and return dressed like a woman in a resplendent zari choli and sari, with a colourful silken braid attached to his topknot, bangles on his wrists, pearls around his neck, a nose ring and jingling anklets. Thereafter, for a few days, he would shun the company of men entirely and sit and chat only with women. Apart from this, he would also observe four days of untouchability each month, as menstruating women do, and attend court only after he had performed the ritual of cleansing bath on the fourth day. "

Though, one cannot question the masculinity of Baba (called thus affectionately by his courtiers) because his first wife had borne him a son who had unfortunately died young. Thus assured Moro Pant agreed to marry his daughter to Baba who had sent emissaries asking for

Chhabili's hand in marriage. The marriage took place as per the rituals and Chhabili was renamed Lakshmi Bai.

“Lakshmi Bai's was not a happy marriage. As a husband, Gangadhar Baba was a stern and suspicious husband who allowed his wife very little freedom. Lakshmi Bai was confined within the walls of the palace and was mostly kept under lock and key with her chambers guarded day and night by armed women. No male was allowed to enter the quarters. Under such exacting circumstances, the poor girl began to lose much of her earlier glow and, as a recluse, acquired a few strange habits.”

Being childless and on his deathbed Baba Sahib had requested the British Resident Gordon Sahib to permit them to formally adopt a boy from one of the close relatives. Gordon Sahib who was very fond of Baba and had a sympathetic attitude towards him did his very best to plead their case with the Governor General in Calcutta, but was told that under the newly applied Doctrine of Lapse no exceptions could be made and since the couple in question does not have a biological male heir, Jhansi will be eventually merged in the British Empire. Gordon Sahib was instructed to take charge as Chief Administrator which he carried out immediately and became the Resident Administrator in Charge of a huge part of the principality of Jhansi. After Baba Sahib's death, only a small part of Jhansi Fort was left to the widowed Rani, along with the royal treasuries.

Lakshmi Bai wanted to undertake a pilgrimage to Kashi or Prayag where she could be tonsured like a traditional Brahmin widow but was refused the permission by the Gordon Sahib to do so. Therefore, she engaged herself in detailed everyday rituals that she could do in her limited space of the fort. She would get up and take an early bath, smear her forehead with ashes and pay three Brahmins a rupee coin each every day. Lakshmi Bai had already adopted a young boy inkeeping with the wishes of her late husband and now she began a series of correspondence with the British as an effort to retain her kingdom back. But by this time, May had begun and the revolt against the new cartridges had begun which had turned the British even sterner. Rani's request thus remained unattended for a very long time along with the matter regarding her pension.

The news of break out the army camp at Meerut brought about a sudden change at Jhansi because the royalty had been repeatedly snubbed by the British. In fact on June 9, 1857 Gordon Sahib requested the Rani to assume control over Jhansi along with its revenues and several British families residing in the area were forced to appeal to the queen for protection. He asked her to have full control over Jhansi until the revolt subsides and she should be in charge of the protection of the Resident's family as well. The Rani was a “noble soul” and she agreed to protect Gordon Sahib's family who was seven months pregnant and in delicate health.

After taking the rule of Jhansi into her hands, the Rani ordered the royal ammunitions factory to work harder and faster as they had to gear for a bigger battle. She then also started preparing for various rituals to pray for peace in the kingdom. At the Mahalakshmi Temple, the holy Navachandi recitations(prayers to the destructive avatar of goddess Durga) were

being held and alms were offered to the poor. At the temple of Lord Ganesha, special prayers were recited continuously every day. A special Yagna was also decided to be performed and on the first day, the Rani herself with her son in her lap attended all the inaugural rituals. It was also decided later to have a ritual recitation of the Durga Saptashti (a tract containing seven hundred verses to Goddess Durga) along with Sapta Chandi fire sacrifice.

Besides strengthening herself spiritually, the Rani also began to strengthen her body getting ready for the impending battle. She once again began a rigorous physical routine that she had been doing as a young girl but had to give up due to the restrictions imposed on her by Baba Sahib. She would rise at dawn and began her day wrestling and weightlifting followed by riding her horse. She would jump walls, leap over moats and even occasionally ride an elephant. After a vigorous session at the royal gymnasium she would then break her fast and take a long luxurious bath and dress in her white saree, put ashes on her forehead, pay some money to three Brahmins and then sit in a room to pray. Sometimes she would also rest for some time instead of taking a bath first. She would also pray to the Holy Basil and then worship Lord Shiva as per the scriptures.

After all this, she would attend the court and was so observant and vigilant that one missing courtier was easily noticed by her. After attending court she would proceed for lunch and rest and then emerge again to take a look at the gifts sent and would nod at something if she liked to be kept in the royal treasury and everything else was to be distributed to the poor.

Around three in the afternoon she held court and at this time she would appear as the traditional *Viraangana*—dressed in a male attire: “pyjamas, a waistcoat and a headgear with a starched fan like top. Around her waist, she tied a scarf with gold embroidery and hung from it a sword in a scabbard. She was tall, fair woman—dressed thus, she looked like an avatar of a warrior goddess.”

Rani was an able administrator. When Barugsagar, a tiny principality was disturbed by the criminal activities of some men, the Rani herself went and camped in the place for a fortnight and made sure the men responsible were arrested and punished properly. A few of them were hanged and few sent to Jail. No poor man who sought her help was ever turned away and no Brahmin went empty handed from her door. No plead went unheard. Versaikar notes, “For some eleven months that followed the Rani’s regaining charge of Jhansi, it felt as though the regime of the white men had never existed in the north.” Soon the news of Banapur being captured by the British reached Jhansi which is close by. The people panicked realising that Jhansi would naturally be the next stop, but the calm Rani decided to face the enemy and began to plan for the battle. Guns were mounted on all the outer walls of the fort and the fort was filled with food to last for months. Elaborate arrangements were made for cooking in case of a siege so that the people within the fort would not starve. All the silver wares of the royal treasury and the fort were sent to be minted into coins. Side by side more rituals were conducted for the victory of the people and restoration of peace.

Finally when the British forces reached Jhansi, they tried to scale the walls of the city in vain for the first few days. Every time they tried, they were pushed back by the gunners with quick

bursts of fire. Only a few men knew the way to get inside the walls. On the third day, the British caught hold of one of them and God alone knows why, but he passed on this secret to the British. Maybe, he was frightened. The Rani was deeply distressed at this sudden attack of the enemy but she did not lose her composure. “She appointed more men to replace the ones we had lost, and without stopping to eat or drink, she devoted herself to keeping a constant vigil over her fort and her city.” She tired her best to comfort and reassure her people and personally supervised the site of all attacks. By the seventh day, the British who had be regularly targeting the weak side of the walls, managed to break a part of it. The Rani, did not panic but quietly sent skilled masons in the dark to repair the damage during night and before the British could know it, Jhansi was back in the battle with full force. The battle turned fierce and soon the British located the water sources and started to fire at them so that they could disrupt the water supply to the fort. Lots of men were lost on both sides, the Rani was exhausted by now yet she kept motivating her men without resting. She was worried that the promised help from the Peshwa had not yet arrived and she did not know how long could they last like this. Yet she never showed any of her concerns openly and only cheered her brave soldiers. On the tenth day, TantyaTope arrived from Kalpi. Both the sides fought ferociously, while the Rani and her generals watched through telescopes. Suddenly they saw Tope’s army retreat and soon Tope too fled the field. The people of Jhansi understood its implied meaning—their fall was sure and soon. Naturally this victory boosted the morale of the British soldiers. All night they continued to fire at the fort of Jhansi. On the eleventh day, she emerged dressed in male attire, sword in hand, and began to take rounds and tried to boost the morale of her soldiers. Versaikar reports, “One must praise the lone woman, our great Rani, who roamed the fort and defended the city constantly for eleven days while the British bombarded us.” Many unfortunate events bribery and treachery followed and the situation finally came when the British entered the city of Jhansi and the Rani realised that she would have to face the British herself and geared up for a fight. But soon she was advised otherwise by a senior general and asked to leave. He told here that it was foolish of her to risk her life at this point when the city has already been taken by the British. The best course would be to escape and plan for future strategy.

Hearing cries and wailing from the city, the Rani’s heart was moved immensely and she once again called her men to leave her so that she could then blow herself up alone in this fort. But an old soldier told Rani that she should not blame herself for the fate of the city. He reminded her that it is the decree of the fate and maybe a cleansing of some old sins of the people of Jhansi. He also reminded her suicide is a sin and she should escape and plan for the future. In the process even of they die, they will die as warriors and not sinners. Thus advised, the Rani humbly touched the feet of this soldier thanking him for guiding began with renewed vigour. She finally left at midnight, along with the most trusted men dressed in unorthodox male attire, “trousers, stockings, boots and weapons by her side” mounted on her most precious steed with her son secured to her back with a satin sash.

“Having defied death, the Rani had reached safety at a friendly Kalpi, but memories of her poor, beleaguered Jhansi haunted her constantly. Without her, each citizen of

Jhansi felt as though he was tied to a pyre, awaiting his cremation. Kaka and I were no exceptions.”

Saving their lives through the death stricken Jhansi, when Versaikar and his Kaka reached Kalpi, they themselves saw the Rani riding, dressed as a male Pathan, looking exhausted, dusty and tense. she told them, “I don’t know what sins I have committed to end up thus. We fought long and hard at Charkhari, but we were defeated, and now they are following us to Kalpi, where we shall fight them again, and whatever is written in our fate will happen.”

The battle of Kalpi as history records lasted for three days. The soldiers of the Peshwa were already exhausted. Moreover, the news of defeat of the Indian side at Jhansi, Lucknow and Delhi had disheartened them. On the last day, as the victors entered the city and the Rani, TantyaTope and Rao Sahib disappeared into the forest.

After this defeat the trio turned towards Gwalior, camped in a forest at the army cantonment across River Murar and they decided to ask the Shindes for help, who curtly refused. The trio then got ready to sack the royalty and a lot of chaos that resulted which history records. The trio took control over the royal palace and the treasury and assumed complete control over the kingdom. But on the eighteenth day, news came that a large combined army of the Shindes and the British was arriving to Gwalior from Agra. Lakshmi Bai, Tantya Tope and Rao Sahib left immediately for Murar with their soldiers. The battle turned out to be bloody one and claimed the life of the Rani. They fought bravely and Rani was shot in the thigh but she continued to fight with valour and courage. Finally a sword lashed her leg and she nearly fell from her horse. Tantya Tope propped her body straight and urged the horse to go ahead. Seeing the Rani thus wounded, the troops also lost heart. While they ran helter skelter struck with fear, the brave queen, the Viraangana breathed her last. The battle ended in British victory.

Lakshmi Bai, thereafter quoted as the Indian Joan of Arc by Hugh Rose, became a symbol of British resistance and inspired the future freedom fighters perpetually. Years after independence, her image of the Viraangana still continues to hold sway over popular imagination and is still used as an iconic symbol of women empowerment in Modern India.

R C Majumdar calls her a ‘reluctant rebel’ while other national historians call her fiercely anti-British and anti-colonial. But on reading Versaikar’s account, Majumdar’s inference seems more rational and logical. As per the colonial discourse, we do see that the deeply loyal Rani was greatly wronged by the British finally turns rebellious. John Kaye and George Malleon in *History of Indian Mutiny* (1896) states, “Whatever her faults in British eyes may have been, her countrymen will ever believe that she was driven by ill treatment into rebellion; that her cause was a righteous cause.” The Indians believe that she was a representative of a collective consciousness of a nation rising from its deep slumber.

Opinions may differ on her response to the circumstances of 1857 but all historians praise her for courage in facing British troops. A. Roy praises her for her ability to infuse loyalty in diverse groups as Bundela Rajputs, Maratha Brahmins, Afgan mercenaries and rebellious Purabiyas. Rani is also admired for her strength to resist greedy relatives trying to claim the

throne of Jhansi. She is admired for her will power and determination when she declares “Main Jhansi Nahi Doongi” (I will not give up Jhansi)

To conclude, in the words of Kayne and Malleon, “being young, vigorous, and not afraid to show herself to the multitude, she gained a great influence, this force of character, added to a splendid and inspiring courage that enabled her to offer a desperate resistance to the British...to [her countrymen] she will always be a heroine.”

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