

Rani Lakshmi Bai and Major General Hugh Rose: A Comparative Analysis

Major General (Dr) RS Thakur (Retd)[@] and Colonel Nikhil Kapoor[#]

Abstract

The Indian Revolt of 1857 was led by many capable leaders from the revolvers' side, namely, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Nana Saheb, Kunwar Singh, and Begum Hazrat Mahal, whereas the fight by the British East India Company forces was steered by senior officers such as Major General J Outram, Major General Hugh Massey Wheeler, Major General Hugh Rose, Brigadier Henry Lawrence and Brigadier John Nicholson.¹ The battles of 1857 have been described by numerous authors in great detail in the last century and a half; however, the comparative analysis of the leadership qualities and military skills of the two most prominent leaders of the revolt, Rani Lakshmi Bai and her principal opponent, Major General Hugh Rose, does not find a mention in history. This article, which is a product of the research of rare/vintage books available in the libraries of Army War College and the Infantry School Mhow, besides other sources available on the subject, endeavors to bridge this historical gap. It is hoped that the article will provide a new perspective on the leadership aspect during an important event of Indian military history.

Introduction

The 'Indian Revolt of 1857' was a landmark event of the 19th century, which shook the British Empire to its foundation and almost brought the British rule in the Indian subcontinent to an

[@]Major General (Dr) RS Thakur (Retd) has done PhD in History from Jammu University in 2010. He retired from Dehradun in January 2021, as GOC Uttarakhand Sub Area. His article "The Indian Revolt of 1857: Global Response" was published by CLAWS in December 2020. He is an alumnus of the National Defence College.

[#]Colonel Nikhil Kapoor was commissioned in the Corps of Army Air Defence in June 2003 from the Indian Military Academy, Dehradun and is a recipient of the Ninth Gurkha Rifles Medal for Military History.

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abrupt end. The desperation with which the British fought to retain their Empire can be gauged by the fact that as many as 182 Victoria Crosses were awarded to the British personnel during the Indian Revolt of 1857, which is precisely the same number of awards given during the Second World War.² The Revolt witnessed key battles that were fought at Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Arrah, Jhansi, and Gwalior. The main leaders, who led the British East India Company forces, were Major General J Outram, Major General Hugh Massey Wheeler, Major General Hugh Rose, Brigadier Henry Lawrence, and Brigadier John Nicholson. On the other hand, the prominent leaders of the revolt were Nana Saheb (1824-1859), Rani Lakshmi Bai (1828-1858), Begam Hazrat Mahal (1820-1879), and Kunwar Singh (1777-1858).

The bulk of the writings on this historical event, dominated by the British authors, do not give a correct perspective as these were written with the intent to further the British imperial interests, as also to project their racial superiority. The British were haunted by the ultimate fear of the possibility of 'Indian Revolt of 1857' leading to more such rebellions globally, which their military may not be able to handle. Such literature on the Revolt, in the form of personal accounts by the British authors, gave a biased account of the battles, glorifying the pursuits of the British generals on one hand and maligning the activities of the rebel leaders on the other. For example, the successes of Major General Hugh Rose were narrated as epitome of heroism rather than historical accounts.³ As such, a comparative analysis of the leadership and tactical skills between the opposing commanders, Rani Lakshmi Bai and Major General Hugh Rose, find but a passing mention in history and is the theme of this article.

Childhood, Education and Military Career

Both the leaders grew up in a rather contrasting environment. Rani Lakshmi Bai, born on 19 November 1828 in Varanasi⁴, came from a humble origin. Her father, Moropant Tambe, worked with Chimnaji Appa at Varanasi and later shifted to Bithur⁵, a small town near Kanpur. She was named Manikarnika at birth and spent her childhood in the Court of Baji Rao at Bithur where her father worked. Her parents had been exiled from Maharashtra and they had moved to Bithur along with the last Maratha ruler, Baji Rao II. She learnt to read and write at home including Persian; the language that was

used in the Court during the period. She also learnt riding, shooting, and swordsmanship during this period.

Hugh Henry Rose, 27 years older than Rani Lakshmi Bai, was born in Berlin on 06 April 1801. His father, Sir George Henry Rose, GCB was a minister at the Prussian Court. Hugh Rose received his education in Berlin. He joined the army on 08 June 1820, as an Ensign in 93 Highlanders, and became a Lieutenant on 24 October 1821. He, however, left the army in 1839 and joined the diplomatic corps. Bulk of his career was spent in diplomatic rather than military tenures.⁶ He was praised more for his tact and diplomatic skills and less as a military commander. He held several diplomatic assignments from 1840 onwards. He was posted in Syria during the Turco-Egyptian War, where he was subsequently appointed as Consul General. Later, he was posted to the British Consulate in Constantinople in 1851. During the Crimean War (1853-1856), he excelled himself while working as the British liaison officer to the Supreme French Command.

Personality Traits of Rani Lakshmi Bai and Major General Hugh Rose

Rani Lakshmi Bai. Rani Lakshmi Bai was civil, polite, intelligent, and a woman of high character. These virtues were demonstrated in sufficient measure during her dealings with the people of Jhansi, who respected her very much. However, in the eyes of the British, she was the second most hated figure after Nana Saheb due to her defiance against the Empire. She has, therefore, been maligned by a few British authors in a baseless manner. For example, GB Malleson has written about Rani Lakshmi Bai — without any historical basis — that she deceitfully led the British officers and their families to mass massacre, in which 60 Britishers, including women and children, had died on 09 June 1857.⁷ But historians such as Kaye were convinced that there was no proof to establish the involvement of Rani Lakshmi Bai in the said massacre. There also exist numerous sources offering massive evidence contrary to what Malleson and some British authors have written.

Rani Lakshmi Bai had an eye for detail. Instead of monitoring things from her palace, she went to every rampart and every gun to oversee the deployment. She selected the best gunners for the job. With her astute leadership, she also ensured that her troops gave a well determined resistance at Jhansi, which included

continuous bombardment from the Fort on to the advancing British forces and quick repair of the walls damaged due to shelling after the siege began on 22 March 1858. Subsequently, when the British forces launched an attack, the battle was fought most furiously by the rebels in every street, room and chamber including a bitter hand to hand fight in the final stages of the British attack on the Jhansi Fort.⁸

Rani Lakshmi Bai had the compassion of a great human being which helped her to become a powerful leader.⁹ She provided clothes to the beggars, attended to her wounded soldiers while they were being treated. She also distributed Scindia's pearl necklace, taken a fortnight before from the treasury in Gwalior, to her followers just before her death.¹⁰ She showed kind heartedness even to her political rival, Sadashiv Rao, who within hours of the departure of the revolted from Jhansi for Delhi, on 09 June 1857, had gathered some troops and occupied Fort Karahra, about 40 km from Jhansi, and declared himself to be the King of Jhansi. However, he was quickly captured by the soldiers of Rani Lakshmi Bai and put in prison, thus allowed to live. Incidentally, he was executed by the British in June 1858 soon after they recaptured Jhansi.

Rani Lakshmi Bai was a strong-willed woman who proactively handled numerous challenges, in the wake of breakdown of British rule in Jhansi in June 1857, from her rivals such as Nathe Khan of Orchha State, Chief of Datiya State, and Sadashiv Rao. Nathe Khan launched an attack on Jhansi on 10 August 1857 and his forces reached the walls of Jhansi Fort. At this crucial juncture, Rani Lakshmi Bai herself joined the battle amongst her troops, for the first time, and defeated his forces. Similarly, she effectively tackled the threat from the forces of Datiya State. It was during this period of extreme chaos in the second half of 1857 that Rani Lakshmi Bai metamorphosed from a modest and gentle person into a deadly warrior. She was a courageous woman and a resolute warrior who challenged the British rule with great determination and fought the British East India Company forces with unparalleled military prowess like no other rebel leader did.

Major General Hugh Rose. General Hugh Rose was known to be good-natured, magnanimous and, like his rival, possessed high character. He had the profound ability to take sound judgments

and was a tireless person.¹¹ In physical bearing, he was unimpressive and gave the impression of a person who was adept in negotiations in court rather than directing tactical situations in field.¹² In May 1858, during the operations in Kaunch and Kalpi, Major General Hugh Rose was indisposed on five occasions¹³ due to sun stroke but got back to work soon due to the sheer force of his will power¹⁴. He displayed ample tact, personal courage, and dedication to duty while performing his tasks as the British liaison officer at the French Headquarters during the Crimean War. As the liaison officer, he excelled himself during the British deliberations with its allies. His efficiency and good performance during the Crimean War led to his promotion to Major General.

Leadership Styles and Military Expertise of both Leaders

Rani Lakshmi Bai. Rani Lakshmi Bai possessed indomitable courage and clarity of purpose like no other leader had. During the first half of 1858, when the British had recaptured Delhi, Kanpur and Lucknow and the British forces seemed to be gaining an upper hand, she never lost sight of her aim and continued to prepare her army for the fight against the British. She made elaborate preparations for the defence of Jhansi Fort. The Fort was stocked with supplies, ammunition, artillery guns etc.¹⁵ She had the acumen to follow the 'scorched earth policy' wherein she cleared the trees around the Fort and walls of Jhansi with a view to deny cover and shade to the British forces who were, thus, adversely affected by the Indian summer.

Simultaneously, Rani Lakshmi Bai fought and defeated the forces of the kings of Datiya and Orchha to deny the opportunity of logistics support to the British forces during their approach towards Jhansi as both these kings were favourably inclined to them. She possessed military virtues of a warrior¹⁶ and was called by none other than her adversary, Major General Hugh Rose as "the best General the rebels ever had". Rani Lakshmi Bai was ably supported by many women. Jhalkari Bai played a significant role in the Revolt of 1857 and subsequently became an advisor to Rani Lakshmi Bai. Other women warriors, Motibai¹⁷, Kashibai, Munder and Sunder looked after important duties in the Jhansi State Forces.¹⁸ Many of these women came from the community of weavers called *Koshti* Community.¹⁹

On 24 May 1858, after the fall of Kalpi, the British thought that they had won the Campaign and Major General Hugh Rose was planning to proceed on sick leave back to England.²⁰ On 01 June 1858, he issued a farewell order to his command assuming that the operations by the Central India Field Force had been completed.²¹ However, they were taken by surprise when Rani Lakshmi Bai along with her forces attacked Gwalior Fort and captured it.²² True to her leadership persona, she fought the British till the end and died bravely on the battlefield as a warrior, dressed in a red jacket, trousers, and white turban, when she received a saber cut from a soldier of 8 Hussar Regiment. Incidentally, four British personnel of 8 Hussar Regiment were awarded with Victoria Cross for the operations of that day.²³

Major General Hugh Rose. General Hugh Rose, when he arrived in Bombay by ship on 12 September 1857, had never served in India before. Moreover, he also had no prior command experience, not even of commanding a platoon. The reason why he, despite this handicap, was given the command of Central India Field Force is not known. As such, his selection to the given appointment, overlooking many other claimants, came as a shock and was a subject of criticism in India amongst the British officers. He took over command of the Central India Field Force at Indore on 16 December 1857.²⁴ During the initial phase of the campaign, he was mocked at by his subordinates because of his lack of experience and poor health. Moreover, his concept of Battle of Rahatgarh, fought in January 1858, was questioned by many as the frontal attack by the British East India Company forces allowed the revolvers to easily disengage from the battle and put up another fight to the East India Company forces at Barodiya.²⁵ Although as per Smyth, the Battle of Rahatgarh was a huge success, a claim which is not supported by historical evidence.²⁶

Sooner than later, Major General Hugh Rose gained a strong hold over his command and displayed enduring determination, because of which he conducted operations around Sagar and Madanpur with great efficiency. However, he also had another factor in his favour, luck. The fight over Madanpur pass was indeed intense as the rebels were dominating the pass having occupied the heights on both sides along with deployment of artillery. The British forces were bombarded with intense fire and even Major General Hugh Rose's horse was shot. The battle could have gone

either way. However, due to the attack by the infantry of the British forces, the situation was saved just in time. An aspect of war fighting that Major General Hugh Rose gave great importance was reconnaissance. He personally spent hours in observing the details of approaches and terrain before the attacks were planned on Rahatgarh, Sagar, and Jhansi Forts.

Overall Comparison of the Two Leaders

Having narrated the personal attributes, leadership styles, and military skills of Rani Lakshmi Bai and Major General Hugh Rose, it needs to be brought out as to who was the better of the two leaders from an overall perspective. As an individual, both the leaders were good-natured, capable, and had strong character; however, Rani Lakshmi Bai surpassed her opponent due to her additional qualities of compassion, personal valour, and the unique talent to inspire her subordinates. As a strategist, both the personalities were evenly matched. Major General Hugh Rose exhibited good generalship during the Campaign, especially during the battles of Jhansi and Gwalior. He quickly adapted to the prevailing situation and relentlessly pursued his critical objective — the capture of Jhansi Fort. Moreover, during April-June 1858, luck was on his side as by now the Revolt was in its last stage with Delhi, Kanpur, and Lucknow having already fallen to the British forces a few months before. In addition, the support provided to him by the kings of Bhopal, Gwalior, Orchha, Datia, and others in terms of logistics and firepower ensured that his forces were supplied at critical junctures. Rani Lakshmi Bai, on the other hand, skillfully handled the ambiguous and uncertain environment prevailing in the Bundelkhand Region in 1857-58.

At the tactical level, Rani Lakshmi Bai proved herself to be a much better leader by her qualities of optimum use of ground and human/material resources, superlative output from her command by employing the right man or woman for the job, and correct and timely response to emerging battle situations. Overall, Rani Lakshmi Bai was a better leader. Notwithstanding the above, during April-June 1858 she was fighting a lone battle. British East India Company forces had an upper hand and the other rebel leaders/kings, with the exception of kings of smaller states of Banpur, Banda, Shahgarh and Charkhari, had refused to collaborate with her in anticipation of an impending British victory in the region.

Conclusion

Rani Lakshmi Bai and Major General Hugh Rose, two leaders of varying skills, fought against each other in the last phase of the Indian Revolt of 1857, in the battles of Jhansi, Kalpi, and Gwalior. In September 1857, before he set foot on the Indian shore for the first time in his life, Major General Hugh Rose, born and brought up in Berlin, had already accumulated more than 35 years of mostly diplomatic acumen with no military command experience whatsoever. On the other hand, Rani Lakshmi Bai, though groomed in horse riding, sword fighting, and shooting, lacked any formal education. As an individual, both the leaders possessed exceptional human qualities although Rani Lakshmi Bai surpassed her rival in attributes of compassion, personal valour, and the ability to inspire subordinates. As strategist, both leaders excelled themselves in equal measure, however at the tactical level, Rani Lakshmi Bai demonstrated better expertise on many occasions. Overall, Rani Lakshmi Bai proved herself to be superior to her opponent but lost out in June 1858, in the final stage of the Campaign, due to many overriding factors against her and her forces. She, with her extraordinary leadership qualities and military prowess, gave the British East India Company forces their bloodiest fight in the Campaign and she died like a true warrior, fighting on the battlefield on 17 June 1858.

Endnotes

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¹⁶ Pandit Sunderlal, *British Rule in India*, SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2018, pp 457-58.

¹⁷ Ranade, p. 114.

¹⁸ Om Shankar Asar, *Jhansi Kranti Ki Kashi*, Prachi Printers and Packagers, Lucknow, 2008, pp.795-796.

¹⁹ Ranade, p. 165.

²⁰ Edwardes, pp 178.

²¹ Anderson and Anderson,pp 76-77.

²² Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, Sree Saraswaty Press Ltd, Calcutta,1957,pp 293-294.

²³ Smyth, *The Story of the Victoria Cross*, pp 88.

²⁴ Edwardes, p 159.

²⁵ F R Sedgwick, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857*, Forster Groom & Co Ltd, London, 1909, pp 127-128.

²⁶ Rainer Jerosch, *The Rani of Jhansi: Rebel Against Will*, Aakar Books, Delhi,2008, p 129.