The Bravest and Best Military Leader

The Tragedy of The Rani of Jhansi

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Manu Tambe, the future Rani of Jhansi, was born in Varanasi of noble Maratha stock, probably in 1827, which made her thirty years old in 1857. Her biographer, D. V. Tahmankar, states that she was an unusual maiden for her era: not only could she read and write, but she was athletic, riding and fencing well, and she showed early powers of leadership. In 1842 the first step towards those events that were to culminate in her falling on the field of battle occurred: she was married to Gangadhar Rao, the Raja of Jhansi, being named Lakshmi Bai.

Jhansi, in those days, with its broken, hilly country and tracts of jungle, was a traditional outpost protecting the Deccan; to the north and east lay the open plains of the Ganga, and to the west the semi- arid areas of Rajputana. It became noted for its fort which towered over the city, and which had been built by one of its incumbents, the Raja of Orcha, in 1615. In 1759 , it came under the suzerainty of the Marathas, but in 1804 its then ruler signed a treaty with the British. By 1838 when Gangadhar Rao succeeded, though he maintained his own small army, the British had two battalions stationed at Jhansi. Gangadhar Rao appears to have been an able administrator who suppressed thugs and cleared bands of bandits from his territory.

The young girl from Varanasi was his second wife, the first having died childless. She startled the priests and guests at the wedding ceremony, by crying out: "Make the knot very firm". In 1851, after a pilgrimage to Varanasi, a child was born, but tragically died some three months later. With the child's death, Gangadhar Rao went into a decline. Finally he began to suffer from pernicious dysentery, and on 17th November, 1853, he lost consciousness. However, on the 19th, it would appear that he had recovered slightly for he adopted, amid religious ceremonies, a five-year-old, Damodar, as his heir, and was able to dictate his will. The adoption ceremony and the will-making were attended by witnesses, including Major Ellis, the Assistant Political Agent at Jhansi, and, pointedly, the will was handed to him. On the 21st, Gangadhar died. The question now was: what would the British do? With the onset of Gangadhar's long illness, this had brooded heavily over the Jhansi Court, for the record of the British was clear in its pattern. After destroying the great Maratha confederacy by 1818 and settling its administrative head, the Peshwa of Pune, at Bithur near Kanpur as a mere pensioner, the British under the thrusting policies of Dalhousie, began their encroachments else-

where. With their instrument the notorious doctrine of lapse, where by the demise of a ruler without a lineal heir caused his state to revert to the direct administration of the paramount power, the British took over, firstly, Sambhalpur, a small state in the then Bengal: next Satara, which had great prestige in the Maratha country as the base of their old power; followed by Nagpur, one of the five large states of the old Maratha Confederacy; and Karauli, a small but ancient Rajput state. The Mughals and Marathas had also used the doctrine of lapse, but it was customary to permit recognition of an adopted son as heir.

Of this period, Tahmankar says: "Widows were not only forbidden to marry again, but made to feel as ashamed of their position as if they had been to blame for the death of their husbands. Religious customs demanded that a widow must shave off her hair, wear a coarse one-colour sari, sleep without a mattress, and spend the rest of her life as a menial servant to her husband's family, despised and insulted by all, her very existence resented as that of an unwanted and useless survivor. No wonder many widows chose to commit suttee and die on their husbands' pyres. A royal widow was not exempt." The hand of British officialdom interposed; it forbade her journey to Varanasi where the haircutting ceremony was to happen. Soon after the Rani's assumptions as Regent, the Political Agent for Gwalior and Bundelkhand, Major Malcolm, was writing appreciatively of her administration to Calcutta. An early indication came with her setting aside purdah (except when dealing with the British), and in the business of government she began to show her real worth, necessarily played down during the marriage; though she maintained the traditional role expected of her, she was clearly an intelligent, articulate, and forceful ruler.

Her duel with the British for the fate of Jhansi ensued soon after Gangadhar's death. She wrote and argued her case herself, quoting the treaties of 1817 and 1842 and the adoption ceremony itself, and to reinforce the validity of an adopted heir, Hindu scriptures acknowledging this. Ellis supported her deposition and forwarded it to his superior, Malcolm, who, though he personally had a high opinion of the Rani, did not specifically add his recommendation when he sent it on to Calcutta. On the 16th February, 1854, the Rani drew up an another petition, again with a fully supporting covering despatch by Ellis, and, at this stage, Malcolm changed his mind and endorsed this second petition. However, on 27th February, Dalhousie rejected the Rani's first plea and ordered the annexation of Jhansi; the following day, the second petition, bearing Malcolm's positive recommendation arrived. The last act in this unhappy business came on 15th March, when it fell to the unfortunate Ellis, as Dalhousie's representative, to pass on formally his decision to the Rani. She received him "most courteously, separated by a purdah."

After he had expounded the whole ruling, she replied, I will never give up Jhansi!".

At the then cost of some 60,000 rupees, she sent a British and Indian legal delegation to London to represent her appeal to the court of Directors, but the answer of that omnipotent body was: No. Malcolm, to give him his belated due, now tried to get the best possible treatment for her, a generous lumpsum settlement and retention of some of her privileges, but the ultimate parsimonious result was a monthly pension of 5,000 rupees, out of which she was expected to pay her late husband's debts. Sir Robert Hamilton, the Agent for Central India, protested to Calcutta about this shabby treatment, but to no avail. The Rani moved out of the palace by the Fort to a private residence in the city, and there for the next three years she stayed discreetly in the background, her relations with British officials distantly correct. She is described at this stage by several who knew her, such as John Lang, her legal adviser for the abortive London appeal, as being a handsome woman with obvious personality.

When the historic chain of events occurred in 1857, the Jhansi garrison, part of the 12th Infantry and the 14th Irregular Cavalry, killed most of their officers on 6th June, and seized the Star Fort in the cantonment which contained the magazine and treasure. The British community fled to the Fort in the city, and the next day the sepoys laid siege to it. She offered the sanctuary of her own house for the women and children but this was rejected; she sent 100 matchlockmen to assist the besieged but these were sent away; more she could not do. Inevitably, the siege of the city Fort ground to its conclusion. On 8th June, the sepoys declared the Rani ruler again and marched off to Delhi.

While fortunes swayed about Delhi and the Ganga valley, at Jhansi the Rani dealt with her domestic problems; she crushed one usurper and also the armed incursions of two covetous neighbouring rajas; finally, in August, she faced a more serious threat, the army of another warlike lady, the Rani of Orcha, whose general she defeated, and then Jhansi was at peace until early 1858. After the departure of the sepoys in June, she had sent a despatch to the Commissioner at Sagar (Saugor) giving an account of the events and stating she had assumed the Regency again, but she soon became aware that in British eyes she was prejudged and a marked enemy. She set about improving Jhansi's defences and the training of her forces with considerable energy.

It was not the least of the Rani's misfortunes that the British would come in the person of the ablest British professional soldier to emerge during

1857, Major - General Sir Hugh Rose, who had arrived in India only in September, 1857. About this time, a force of two brigades and a siege train, later to be called the Central India Field Force, was assembling in the Bombay Presidency and Rose, a Queen's officer who had seen service in the Near East and the Crimea, was given command. Later in 1860, as Lord Strathnairn, he was to become the British Commander- in- Chief in India.

On 6th January, 1858, the Central India Field Force left Mhow for Saugor, which it relieved on the 3rd February. The next major objective was Jhansi itself, some 125 miles through three defiles held in strength by both the sepoys and the Bundelkhand chiefs, such as the Nawab of Banda (the son of the late Peshwa and Mastani, whom he had wanted to marry), and the Rajas of Banpur and Shahgarh. Rose selected Madanpur Pass as his point of attack, and with a wide, outflanking march, turned the positions of the 58th Infantry and the Bundelas dug in there. However, orders now came from the British Commander-in-Chief, Sir Colin Campbell, that Rose was to cooperate with Major-General Whitlock's column from the Madras Army in the relief of Charkari, where it was deemed politically important to hasten to the aid of the Raja there. Rose resisted the Charkari diversion. As it was, due to the opposition and the terrain, it had taken him some six weeks to move from Saugor to Jhansi; however at 7 a.m. on 20th March, his leading elements reached there and his cavalry moved around the city to invest it. The siege of Jhansi, with the Rani's standard flying defiantly from a tower of the Fort, had begun.

By the 25th, the British batteries had closed up, and began a sustained bombardment. After silencing the Rani's guns on the Bastion, in the Military parlance of the day they "played on" selected points of the city wall, attempting to open up a breach, and by the 31st, a very small breach had been made near the Bastion. That evening the redoubtable Tantya Tope was reported to be approaching down the Kalpi road with a force of 22,000 and 28 guns. He had defeated Brigadier-General Wyndham at the Battle of the Brick Kilns outside Kanpur, and though he in turn had been defeated by Campbell, he had skilfully re-grouped his forces with his usual resilience and had recently overcome the Raja of Charkari and had captured his stronghold.

One can imagine the Rani's elation as she stood in her armour with her chiefs on the battlements of the baleaguered city and saw the huge bonfire Tantya had lit on a hill on the Jhansi side of the River Betwa to herald his nearness. Leaving 1,500, which included 500 British, and the siege artillery to continue the investment, Rose marched off with 2,500 to meet Tantya. With his cavalry and horse artillery threatening on the flanks, Rose launched the infantry in the centre which broke Tantya's first line. Tantya was personally

commanding the second line in a sound defensive position in broken ground, but the pell-mell withdrawal of the first line with the British- Indian infantry men intermingled among them prevented any second stand. In desperation, he fired the grass and withdrew.

Tantya's withdrawal had naturally a crushing effect on the defenders of Jhansi; depression and tiredness brought on by the incessant cannonade day and night of the siege took over again which not even the exhortations of the Rani, who was constantly moving among the firing line, gun crews, and working parties, could dispel. It is strange that she did not organize a sortie on the tenuous siege lines, but though the defenders maintained a fierce fire, they remained within. One surmise is that the Rani was apprehensive of traitors among her chiefs.

Rose now turned his full attention again to the city and he decided to attack as soon as possible, on the morning of 3rd April, concentrating on the breach by the Bastion and using scaling ladders. The silent approach of the assault troops, carrying their ladders and fascines, in the dark early hours of the morning was detected near the walls, and most savage hand-to-hand fighting, to which the Rani rushed with her Afghan bodyguard, developed about the breach and the south wall. By nightfall, street-fighting was raging in most parts of the city and the Palace had fallen, though not before fifty of the Rani's Afghan bodyguard who had barricaded themselves in the stables, fell to the last man; the Rani herself had retreated into the Fort. That night, while explosions rocked the city and fires burned in many places, she rode out of a postern gate with the ten-year-old Damodar strapped to her and attended by a small escort; she slipped through the very sparse British cavalry line still holding the ring about the city, though not without belated detection and a running fight which only fell away when the subaltern leading the pursuing troopers became severely wounded. Eventually, the Rani and her party reached the sanctuary of Kalpi.

Kalpi was Rose's next obvious objective. Apart from the fact that the Rani's trail led there, it was the only large town remaining, now that Campbell had recaptured Lucknow. It was also the base of Rao Sahib and contained a sizeable arsenal. A fresh army, under Tantya and with the Rani in the van, marched down the Jhansi road 40 miles to Kunch to meet the advance of Rose. It was not until 1st May that Rose's advanced guard, brushed up against the Kunch position, and not until the 7th that the whole force had closed up ready to deploy and attack. The success at Kunch was achieved by Rose by another flanking march; the sepoys falling back on Kalpi. Tantya conducted a masterly withdrawal. There were to be bitter recriminations;

outcries against Tantya as a commander in that he was alleged to have left the field too precipitately, that the Jhansi soldiers had defended the person of the Rani without regard to the overall battle plan, and inevitably the infantry said that the cavalry had let them down.

After the loss of Kalpi, the leaders collected at Gopalpur, about 46 miles from Gwalior. A gloomy and seemingly hopeless situation confronted them at this very sobering council of war: their last arsenal had just been lost, and the British were closing in on three sides. Then germinated an idea of genius: what about the Fourth side of the net, held shakily for the British by the Maharaja Scindia of Gwalior? Scindia had adhered to the British as he felt, whatever his personal leaning, that they would win through in the end. It is almost certain that this brilliant idea, of revitalization with the riches and resources of Gwalior, came from the Rani. Agents were duly sent ahead to Gwalior, and when the leaders with their force of 7,000 infantry, 4,000 cavalry and 12 guns met the Maharaja's army outside his city, all the Gwalior troops deserted except his personal bodyguard. Scindia left for Agra and the protection of the British garrison there.

To the British, the news of the Gwalior master-stroke came as a thunderclap. At the Central India Field Force, resting at Kalpi, Rose had actually handed over command and was about to proceed on sick leave to Bombay (he had collapsed three times during that day in the soaring heat at Kunch), but, realizing the gravity of the move, he at once reassumed command, and marched on Gwalior. On 16th June, he made contact with the screen near Gwalior, moved around the left flank to cut and seize the road to Agra, and prepared for a major assault on the city.

Meanwhile, one of the additional columns that Campbell had directed to this final area of operations was that of Brigadier-General Smith's. At 7.30 a.m., on 17th June, 1858, he was advancing towards the plain four miles south-west of Gwalior when he came up against sepoys holding a range of low hills barring his path. Smith attacked; as his infantry moved forward, the attacking lines were charged by a body of red-uniformed Gwalior cavalry. Smith was not unprepared for such a development for he had in hand a squadron of the 8th Royal Irish Hussars. The shock of the Hussars' charge shattered the riposte and made it recoil; a hectic fight ensued. Near the end of this skirmish, one horse refused to take a stream and a Hussar rode hard at the near-exhausted rider and cut 'him' down with his sabre. The 'cavalryman" who crashed to the ground hacked, bloody and dying, was the tragic Rani of Jhansi.

At least, that is one version of her death. Like so many aspects of her tragic story, there is conflicting evidence about how she really did die; another is that she was struck in the breast with a carbine ball. However, it is fairly certain that she was mortally wounded, whatever the means, fighting as a soldier in that foray with the Gwalior cavalry which turned into a desperate melee. When the tide of the action had swept by, oblivious of the identity of this particular casualty, her body was retrieved and borne away by her servants to a nearby temple, and there, in her male warrior's attire, bleeding freely, she died. The last words of this childless lady, whose fate was bound to the roll of drums and the boom of cannon, were to entrust her young adopted son to a faithful courtier.

With her death and cremation, all the remaining spirit departed from the army. Tantya and Rao Sahib, against whom the Rani had been storming for their complacency, were able to make their escape, and, two days later, Rose and Scindia entered Gwalior together. Tantya was to redeem his seeming defects as a field commander to become a hit-and-run guerrilla for many long months. Rao Sahib disappeared until the relentless vengeance of the British unearthed him in the guise of a holy man four years later, and he was sent to the gallows in August, 1862. Nana Sahib of Bithur vanished without trace and eventually died in Nepal. However, whatever the confused chronicles of either side, it is clear that the only real leader was a brave and intelligent woman whose simple but realistic military philosophy is typified by a quotation she was fond of: "If you are killed on the battlefield doing your duty you attain deliverance, and if you win victory you enjoy the earth". While her courage is not in doubt, nor her martial ability, what of her as a person? Sir Hugh Rose, her opponent, perhaps gives her the most eloquent contemporary epitaph: "The bravest and best military leader of the 'rebels'." G. B. Halleson in "History of the Indian Mutiny 1857-58" Vol. V (1897) records that "she was driven by ill treatment into rebellion; that her cause was a righteous cause; and that the treatment she received at the hands of Lord Dalhousie was one of the main causes of the disaffection in Bundelkhand and Central India in 1857". S.N. Sinha in "Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi" (1980) concludes that she "was a victim of the rapacious policy of the British Government. The annexation of Jhansi was improper and the treatment meted out to her afterwards by the British authorities was most undesirable". Charles Miller's summation (1977), though considered a little naive by some, is nevertheless striking and evocative, and therefore worth quoting, "a dainty young woman, who may have been braver than Nicholson, a smarter politician than Palmerston, and a greater patriot than Gandhi".