

Lakshmi Bai, Warrior Queen

Lakshmi Bai or “Rani Jhansi” was a revolutionary warrior queen. Her father raised her knowing she’d become a ruler. However, before Lakshmi Bai had the chance to rule, the British Doctrine of Lapse was invoked in the late 1840s. This was a law that mandated that princely states with leaders lacking natural born heirs would be annexed by British. Because of this, during the Rani’s rule, the British asked her to vacate. Because of this, she joined the Indian rebellion of 1857— India’s first battle for independence. Today, she’s a cultural icon and nationalist symbol in India, where she is said to be inspiration for women in India and a symbol of fighting back against oppressors. As a ruler, she was a good negotiator and tried diplomatic approaches before fighting in the rebellion, but she didn’t try diplomacy much after the rebellion. Lakshmi Bai’s rule challenges the patriarchy not only through rebellion against the British men in power who took her kingdom from her, but also through her legacy as a successful female leader in history in a male-dominated world.

One interesting way Lakshmi Bai challenged the patriarchy in her lifetime was through her dress. “Encouraged women to live contrary to perceived notions of nineteenth-century Indian feminine decorum” (Lecture), she was seen as “intelligent, simply-dressed” ruling in a “business-like manner” and even wore a turban which was a “male” accessory. Some accounts even say she always dressed in male attire. An interesting aspect of patriarchal perspective present in her legacy is the reports that the British called her a “Jezebel-like figure” whereas Indians she ruled and fought for saw her as a heroine.

Despite this, in her lifetime Lakshmi Bai still had to rely on certain aspects of the patriarchy to survive. She had to rely on her father to set her up with the king, and had to rely on the king until his passing, and even after, during British rule: “The viceroy, Lord Dalhousie

settled on the queen a pension of 5,000 rupees a month, which she refused, living on her deceased husband's private estate" (Kincaid 2). Despite the British actively plotting to dethrone her, they still find a way to make her rely on them monetarily, and she has no other choice but to do so. This, as well as the custom of child marriage causing her to be married to the king at the age of eight, are ways she was forced into complying with the patriarchy.

Another interesting aspect of the patriarchy that influences Lakshmi Bai's legacy is the way she is portrayed historically by mostly male voices in the military, government and academia. Accounts of her life and behavior seem rife with male gaze, almost surprised at the queen's proficiency in leadership: "The queen was an educated woman, and often passed written orders herself. She was an excellent and tireless rider, and daily settled boundary and similar disputes on the spot. She collected the revenues, managing them with thrift and prudence" (Kincaid 3). However, in this way, she again challenges patriarchy through her skills at typically "male" pursuits like horsemanship, finance and writing.

Lakshmi Bai not only defied norms as a leader but as a warrior as well. In the rebellion of 1857, she was said to excel at military tactics, such as this battle record: "His artillery was well served and it would have dispersed the Peshwa's infantry had not Lakshmi Bai charged with her own sowars on the flank of Sindia's guns, sabred the gunners, and allowed the rebel foot to rally" (Kincaid 4). The realm of military, especially military leadership, was extremely male dominated, therefore her success in the rebellion as a warrior queen is also essential to her legacy, and proof that women in war can not only be equal, but better than men.

In spite of her accomplishments, male historians, specifically British, still made Lakshmi Bai out to be evil and murderous. Her legacy in British history is in complete contrast to her

Indian legacy; for example, she's said to be "a household name in India, her story the subject of primary school readers and comic books" (Lebra-Chapman 9) and said to be seen as "a feminist, as a champion of the rights of labor and of the cause of the oppressed in places far beyond her home" (22). This can only be attributed to misogyny and colonialist viewpoints, as in the words of one historian, "other similarly unfortunate have yet received their meed of praise, but she gained nothing but hatred and obloquy" (Kincaid 6). Despite this attempted tainting of legacy, Lakshmi Bai has served as an emblem of freedom of oppression and female strength for almost two centuries.

