**Warrior Women**

**Lakshmi Bai – Episode Two Transcript**

**Anna Ward:** This series was made possible with the National Lottery Heritage Fund. With thanks to National Lottery players.

Just a warning before we start. This episode contains references to underage marriage, child loss, sexual violence and suicide.

Welcome to Warrior Women, a Royal Armouries series where we tell the stories of women throughout history and explore what it really means to be a ‘warrior.’ We delve into the lives of complex characters, bust some myths, and find out about the arms and armour these women would have wielded.

I’m your host, Anna Ward, from the exhibitions team at the Royal Armouries.

‘The Indian Joan of Arc.’

‘A rebel’

‘A jezebel.’

‘A rapacious whore.’

‘As brave as a man.’

A warrior queen who defended her kingdom of Jhansi on the battlefield. As she fled the British forces who burned her fortress to the ground, she soared through the sky on horseback, her young son strapped to her back, sword in the air and disappeared into the night.

She returned at the battle of Gwalior, leading her troops into one final stand-off. It was there she was killed, dying valiantly, dressed as a man.

India’s greatest heroine has been called many things… but who was she? Will we ever really know?

In today’s episode we’re talking about Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi.

First thing’s first. Lakshmi Bai was not the name she was born with. She was born Manikarnika Tempe, and affectionately nicknamed ‘Manu.’ There’s actually not a lot written about her life before the Indian Rebellion of 1857.

Historians are still arguing over when she was born. Indian historians say 1835, British historians say 1827 or 1828.

She lost her mother at an early age, and was raised by her father Moropant Tempe, a Brahmin who worked in the court of Peshwa Baji Rao II. A Brahmin is at the top of the hierarchy in the Hindu caste system – they’re usually priests or teachers and are highly respected.

But Manu was not a typical, traditional Brahmin girl. It’s said that she spent a lot of her childhood in the company of boys and was treated like one. So, she learned to read and write, which was unusual for a girl at the time. She could ride a horse, learned martial arts, and wrestling and she could expertly wield a sword and fire guns.

Before we get into this next part, just a warning that I’m about to talk about an underage marriage here. If you want to skip ahead 30 seconds or so, please do. We need to point out that there’s an obvious power imbalance here in age, gender, class and hierarchy and we can’t excuse it by saying that it was another time, that it’s in the past. It’s an uncomfortable truth of so many girls’ and women’s histories.

If we are to rely upon Indian sources, which say she was born in 1835, that in 1842, a seven-year-old Manu, who was not of royal birth, was promised to marry not just any aging, childless, widower - but a royal, aging, childless widower - Maharaja Gangadhar Rao - the King of Jhansi.

Already well into his forties, Ganghadar Rao was desperately seeking an heir. Perhaps it’s because of this that he cast his net so wide. The marriage would have been consummated around the time that Manu was fourteen years old, and it was common practice for women to change their names once they were married.

Manikarnika became Lakshmi Bai, the Rani or Queen of Jhansi. She was named Lakshmi, after the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity.

With a new name came a completely new way of life. A life that must have felt very strange.

She lived a life of purdah in the Zenana, or women’s quarters of the palace. Women were segregated and it was forbidden for men who were not relatives to enter.

There are plenty of references to the Maharaja not taking much of an interest, and her pleas to spend time outside of the Zenana horse riding and training with arms were largely ignored.

Legend tells us that Lakshmi Bai had trained her own regiment of warrior women in Jhansi. But given the Maharaja’s ignorance of her requests to train with weapons outside of the Zenana, it’s more likely that this would have taken place after his death. She allegedly gathered together her maidservants and taught them horse riding, use of weapons, pole climbing and wrestling.

According to Vishnubat Godse, in his observations of the Rani, “weightlifting, wrestling and steeple chasing came before breakfast.”

There are also mentions of specific women who are said to have followed her into battle including Jhalkari Bai, a dalit soldier and her friend and maidservant, Mundar.

As the marriage went on, the need for an heir became greater. It was particularly important because India had become the permanent settlement of the East India Company and under the rule of the Doctrine of Lapse, the British gave themselves the right to annex any territory under their influence, if its ruler died without an heir.

So, after nine years of marriage, in 1851, Lakshmi Bai gave birth to a son. Sadly, at just three months old, the boy died.

She must have felt so lonely. The pain of the loss, and the feelings of helplessness of not being able to give the King an heir, the reason that she had been made Queen in the first place.

It’s unclear whether they kept on trying and how many losses there were, but eventually they adopted the Maharaja’s cousin’s son - Damodar Rao, who would become the heir to the Kingdom of Jhansi.

The dying Maharaja left instructions for Lakshmi Bai to rule as her son’s regent.

After his death in 1854, she soon received the news that Damodar Rao’s parentage was considered illegitimate, and the rules of the Doctrine of Lapse would apply to Jhansi.

She petitioned Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of the East India Company and refused to accept the 60,000 rupees they offered as a form of pension, famously saying “I will not give up my Jhansi.”

She was denied, and the British stationed a garrison in Jhansi to oversee its running, but that didn’t deter her, she continued to appeal over and over again - a process that spanned three years.

Now, while this was happening in Jhansi, in 1857, the Indian Army began to rebel against the East India Company. Although the causes for the rebellion were multiple and complicated, a main trigger was the paper cartridge used with the new Pattern 1853 Enfield Rifle.

The cartridges were greased at one end to lubricate the bullet which needed to be pushed down the barrel from the muzzle end for loading. The cartridges required the sepoys or soldiers to tear it with their teeth. Although the cartridge was to be bitten at the opposite end, it was likely that traces of the grease would have been accidentally ingested.

The grease was made from pig fat and from cows. This a complete affront to Muslims and to Hindus who were serving on behalf of the East India Company. They believed that they were being forced into Christianity. If you were seen to be using the cartridges, you would lose caste. In the best case, you may have to pay a penance that you could not afford.

The result was widespread violence which made its way to Jhansi in June 1857.

Lakshmi Bai had agreed to give refuge to around 60 British men, women and children fleeing from the bloodshed, she let them take shelter in the Fort. As food supplies were running low, the Rani granted them safe passage through Jhansi on the condition that they laid down their arms.

But the refugees did not make it out of Jhansi and were massacred by the sepoys.

The British were livid and blamed Lakshmi Bai, accusing her of taking revenge for their refusal to overturn the decision to annex Jhansi.

Even today, we are still unclear on her involvement or who ordered the massacre. Although she proclaimed her innocence, the British would not accept it. There were many that would describe her as “cruel, unwomanly killer of innocent women and children.”

Another warning here, the next 30 seconds contain graphic and disturbing descriptions of violence, including against children.

The Bombay Times from 16 October 1885, almost thirty years later, painted a disturbing picture of what had happened at Jhansi – “the whole of the European community, men, women and children were forcibly brought out of their homes; and, in the presence of the Ranee, stripped naked…She who styles herself as “Ranee,” ordered… their being tied to trees at a certain distance from each other, and having directed the little children to be hacked to pieces before the eyes of their agonised parents, she gave the women into the hands of the rebel sepoys, to be dishonoured first by them, and then handed over to the rabble…those who still lingered were put to death with the greatest cruelty, being severed limb from limb.”

Of course, we need to consider the bias in this account - as we’ll hear later on, British mutiny novels would be quick to paint her as a needlessly cruel ruler.

There are eyewitness accounts that defend her, like a Mr Martin who would later write in a letter to her son, Damodar Rao:

“Your poor mother was very unjustly and cruelly dealt with – and no one knows her case as I do. The poor thing took no part in the massacre…”

The British would have their revenge, and their response would eventually kill more than three thousand people.

We need to question why, given these atrocities - all of the deaths and violence - that we don’t have the same level of account provided to the Bombay Times to detail British brutality. We need to remember how this story fits into a wider colonial context - and what the British colonial rule excused in terms of their own massacres.

Now, back to the story.

The British stormed Jhansi, but their bombardment was met with heavy fire.

Lakshmi Bai was not prepared to take things lying down and was up on the ramparts in the midst of the action, shoulder to shoulder with her soldiers, pushing them on.

According to Vishnubat Godse, a priest who had been in Jhansi at the time of battle and had later written about it in his book, Majha Pravas, My Travels, the fighting went on for 11 days and nights.

The fortress burned and the British exploded the armoury and blew apart the temple.

Dr Thomas Lowe, the British Army Field Surgeon recalled “street fighting was going on in every quarter… heaps of dead lay all along the rampart and in the streets below. Those who could not escape threw their women and babies down wells and then jumped down themselves.”

By the time the British had reached the walls of the burning fortress, Lakshmi Bai was nowhere to be found. Legend tells us that this is the moment the young Rani escaped. On horseback, Damodar Rao strapped to her back, she leapt over the ramparts and vanished into darkness.

Now, Vishnubat Godse, who claimed to be there on the night of this daring escape tells the story a little differently. He says that Lakshmi Bai was spotted fleeing down a back staircase. Possibly more plausible, and maybe a relief to all of the mothers listening, but certainly not the stuff of legends.

In June 1858, the Governor General of the East India Company had declared Lakshmi Bai a rebel queen and offered 20,000 rupees for her capture.

The Rani had fled 100 miles northeast of Jhansi. Forming an alliance with other leaders, she fought for Kalpi, the last of the remaining towns in Indian hands. At Gwalior, she led the army into battle for one last time. As the British troops attacked in a charge led by General Hugh Rose, Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi was killed.

Accounts of her death differ. Some say she was shot, others say she was fatally wounded by a sabre, and some say that she was both shot and stabbed.

The reign of the rebel Rani had come to an end, and her mythicisation happened quickly.

In his account of the battle, General Hugh Rose said that Lakshmi Bai was “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.”

It’s a far cry from what Brahmin widows would have been expected to wear at this time - her head was not shaved, her bangles unbroken and she certainly was not wearing the traditional widow white.

Joyce Lebra Chapman in her 1986 book ‘The Rani of Jhansi, a Study in Female Heroism in India’ tells of accounts suggesting that she wore “a modification of the Maharashtrian Sari, where material was draped through the legs to create a loose trouser. She wore trousers, with a long loosely belted tunic, reaching to the ankle and a wide, belted silk blouse with a diamond studded sword in her cummerbund or Sari end. On her head she wore a cap, and a silk turban decorated with a string of pearls.”

It’s a famous image - Lakshmi Bai, on horseback, sword and shield in hand, covered head to toe in beautiful jewels. This perceived opulence was something that British colonial literature would have pounced upon and exaggerated to paint her as a villain.

But was that really the case? What would life have actually been like out on the battlefield for her? What weapons might she have been using? To find out, we asked Natasha Bennett, Royal Armouries’ Curator of Asian and African collections.

**Natasha Bennett:** So, within India, most frequently, Lakshmi Bai is admired as a symbol of resistance. She’s portrayed as a warrior who fought to the death to protect the cause of her family and realm against the British aggressors.

To me it seems that the presence of the weapons is meant to underpin her martial skills, her ability to defend herself and others, because a lot of the narratives that are built up around her highlight her training with swords, her shooting practice, her ability to fight on horseback and there’s a lot of emphasis placed on the way she died in battle in the last days of the rebellion.

There’s quite a range of swords that are depicted, which incorporate different hilts and blades and they really do reflect that range of traditional weapons that was prevalent across Northern India during the nineteenth century. To me, that suggests that she’s often presented in a way that’s likely to be recognisable for local audiences.

I’ve seen one where she’s depicted with a talwar, which is the very recognisable curved blade and a hilt form that has a kind of swollen grip and a disc pommel. So, that’s a form which is very well known and widely used across India at this point. There’s also the more Persian influenced shamshir, which audiences might recognise.

That’s a very commonly used term. In an Indian context, that tends to refer to a sword with a more slender blade, it’s got a far more pronounced deep curve, tapers to a very slim point and it has what we kind of refer to as a ‘pistol grip pommel’. So, I’ve seen the Pata which is the gauntlet sword, so generally a long straight blade, often imported from Europe, interestingly, attached to a rigid, steel gauntlet and cross bar.

You’ve essentially got a lance as a sword blade, attached to your, your hand which has all sorts of interesting repercussions for how they may or may not have been used and how effective they were. You sometimes see her represented with a khanda, so if you see that straight, spoon shaped or leaf shaped blade, with a basket hilt, that’s a khanda. The khanda is an incredibly ancient form of blade. Again, intrinsically linked with India and Indian culture.

It's impossible in a way to be able to untangle the symbolism and the cultural significance of these objects and separate that out and just see them as practical weapons.

Whether we have proof of what she wielded during the rebellion, I can’t say for sure, but she could have used any of those types of sword.

It goes without saying that the Royal Armoury would certainly have had highly decorated arms and armour. Swords were items of royal regalia and amongst rulers and the wider court circles massive resources were poured into producing exquisite arms and armour because they were perfect vehicles for exemplifying the high standards of craftsmanship and you could display your status, your wealth.

So, with swords the hilts would be beautifully embellished with jewels, enamels, damascening. So, they’d be inlayed with gold and other precious metals, and all of this became increasingly lavish over the centuries.

Lakshmi Bai would have had access to weapons which were very highly decorated and probably carried a small fortune in gems set into the hilt. Having said that, whether she would’ve had one that was identifiably hers, I’m not so sure. Simply because it seems unlikely in her capacity as queen that she would have been expected to pursue the same training activities that she had done when she was much younger and before she married.

This is very much speculation on my part based on the small amount that we may know and the considerable amount that we don’t know. But the other thing to bear in mind as well, even if she had had those weapons and had had immediate access to those weapons, whether she would have picked a weapon like that to take into an actual battle, I would be dubious about that.

**Anna Ward:** It’s easy to see why this larger than life, brave and bold, immaculately dressed woman would capture the imagination of the British and Indian people alike, but the portrayal of her is often very complicated, conflicting and contradictory.

She was both revered and hated by the British. Nineteenth century “mutiny” novels which celebrated and romanticised British colonial exploits cast her as a rapacious whore. A manipulative jezebel of no morals who orders her sepoys into humiliating and torturing the white prisoners captured in her Fort.

Other accounts like John Kaye and George Malleson in History of the Indian Mutiny written in 1896, describe her as a “resolute woman,” “young, vigorous and not afraid to show herself to the multitude, she gained a great influence over the hearts of the people. It was this 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.”

Ugh, make up your minds…

We were lucky enough to speak to Harleen Singh, Associate Professor of Literature and Women’s Gender and Sexuality Studies at Brandeis University, who has written extensively on Lakshmi Bai and her representation.

**Harleen Singh:** For the British it was easier to be taken in by a heroic figure like Rani Lakshmi Bai because the British were very much hierarchy bound or hierarchical in thinking about their own society, so the idea of a queen, even an Indian one who was subject to the East India Company then, not then the British Empire, still created a figure of heroism that was much easier, more palatable in some ways, but also someone who played into the idea of hierarchy.

Right, not only was she a queen, um, so there’s class coming in, but she was also a Brahmin, which is the highest echelon of the caste system in Hinduism in India. So even for the British public, she wasn’t just an Indian, she wasn’t just a woman from India, she was an Indian queen, so she came with a particular kind of lineage and hierarchy that I think was much easier for the British public to accept.

**Anna Ward:** She was clearly admired by General Hugh Rose, the man responsible for her defeat at the Battle of Gwalior, he said, “the Indian Mutiny has produced but one man, and that man was a woman.”

Harleen Singh again -

**Harleen Singh:** The interesting part of course also is that Sir Hugh Rose also said that “as long as the Rani is out there, our rear will always be in trouble.” So, I of course in the twentieth and twenty-first century read it as “oh, she’s a real pain in the ass.” His idea of thinking about this I think has to be read twofold.

One of course was that he was acknowledging her valour and the fact it was a worthy foe in this battle, which is the Rani of Jhansi. But also, that he was in a… you know, with the pun intended also demeaning Indian masculinity which he considered inferior and somehow not up to the task. So, that by calling her the only man on the other side he had effectively decimated Indian masculinity.

**Anna Ward**: It’s not uncommon, as you’ll know if you listen to other episodes in this series, for stories of powerful, warrior women to rile up men, and get them to get up off their backsides. If a woman can do this, then so can you!

We also see this crop up in Indian folk ballads again and again -

The Rani of Jhansi was as brave as a man.

She left her work on the world’s wide span.

The Rani of Jhansi was a brave as a man.

The cannon roared over the city wall.

The streets were riddled with powder and ball.

By this Rani of Jhansi, as brave as man.

The Rani of Jhansi who fought like a man.

Lighted a haystack and into it sprang.

So died this Rani, as brave as a man.

**Harleen Singh:** For India to say that she fought like a man was to elevate her, but at the same time it turns a blind eye to all that we have as an archetype in mythology.

The fact of the matter is that you know, there was no need to talk about her fighting like a man because actually, Indian mythology is replete with Indian goddesses and figures from the past much older, who have been not only been in the battlefield but are actually invoked as the warrior goddesses when armies go into battle.

**Anna Ward:** The image of the Goddess Durga is one that comes to mind when we see images of Lakshmi Bai, two swords in hand, on horseback holding the reins with her teeth. Durga, the female avenger associated with protection, strength, motherhood, war and balance is depicted with eight arms, wielding eight weapons.

**Harleen Singh:** One thing we have to understand about Hinduism and Hindu gods and goddesses is that they exist in the realm of the divine. But in Hinduism, gods and goddesses are constantly present on earth in the things that happen, in the worship that people accord them.

So, for example you might think that you’re praying to the gods and goddesses there but, the gods and goddesses make themselves known on earth, through particular rituals, through particular things and you experience the divine. You know, so it’s not a large stretch that when someone as heroic as Lakshmi Bai comes about, she isn’t just channelling a history or mythology of the gods and goddesses, but in fact she becomes a goddess herself.

That, by leading her troops, by being this amazing brave warrior on earth, on the battlefield. People around her in some ways must have experienced the divine through her. Right, and again it’s interesting that it’s not so specific to Hinduism, if you read about other histories of Joan of Arc, she’s canonised as a saint not because of what she did, but because in doing what she did, the divine was channelled through her. That she rose to the level of divinity.

**Anna Ward:** In direct contradiction to Lakshmi Bai’s comparison to Hindu goddesses, is her presentation as a figure of domesticity. Harleen Singh argues that domesticity - the need for an heir to the Kingdom of Jhansi is what propels her to become queen.

**Harleen Singh:** This insistence on her being a mother who is actually fighting for her son’s rights, for her son’s kingdom and being not only a mother to her son but to her kingdom and to her people, you know, again domesticises the warrior into an easily consumable archetype.

She is like all mothers who find the strength to fight anything that comes up against their children. So, she’s not a warrior, she’s a mother who decides to become a warrior in order to protect her child. So, there’s that kind of domesticising, the using of the maternal as a way, I say, to blunt the edges of the warrior.

On the other hand, she’s also domesticised because she’s someone readily assimilated as someone fighting for Indian independence. There was no India in the way that we know of it in the late twentieth and twenty-first century.

We talk about her as a figure who fought for India, really she fought for Jhansi. She fought for her own kingdom and yes, she fought against the British and as such, she then she decided to ally with other rebels to fight for a larger cause and in that way, she did fight for India.

But it’s anachronistic to collapse and think about her as a figure and goddess of independence because that kind of large-scale movement was not present there.

**Anna Ward:** Mahatma Gandhi is credited with achieving Indian independence in 1947 through an ideology of peace and non-violence. Although during the Second World War, Subash Chandra Bose created through the Indian Army the only female regiment on any side, named the Rani of Jhansi regiment - it was rejected by the Indian Government, and in direct conflict with their pacifist narrative.

Following the Rani’s example of bravery in the face of injustice was not welcome and instead Gandhi preferred women experiencing great suffering to stay passive and silent.

**Harleen Singh:** He spoke about women being an integral part of passive resistance because he said, who else but women can tell the world about self-sacrificing? Who else but Indian women should be talking about passive resistance because they have known what it is to suffer nobly.

In 1947 when the partition violence took place, you know, Gandhi’s words on it - I am deeply dismayed to say were not that women should fight against being raped, or fight against the violence or look towards the Rani of Jhansi as a kind of role model he said, “I hear that many women who were faced with this violence and rape in 1947 chose to take their own lives and I think that’s great and some families chose to kill their own daughters, rather than have them be taken in by the opposing side and I think that is great too because you know, it shows the world that we take honour seriously.

It's this hodgepodge of both politics, living conditions, tradition, patriarchy but also mythology and religion. So that you could have on the one hand this notion that she fought like a man, but you could also have someone like a miniscule professor somewhere who could point out that actually, she didn’t really fight like a man, she fought like herself.

**Anna Ward:** But the thing is, we don’t really know who Lakshmi Bai is and in creating this legacy, making her larger than life and a heroine - she’s been stripped of her voice and silenced.

**Harleen Singh:** With someone like Rani Lakshmi Bai, what we’re dealing with is really how she’s perceived, interpreted and then celebrated hundreds of years later. History has so silenced her because in making her a hero, in making her so big, a symbol of the historical past, I don’t know anything really about her life that would tell me more. And the details about her life that have become legend and history, I have to you know, swallow with a grain of salt.

There are references to the fact that she carried with her, her papers, we don’t know whether that was somehow taken by the British when they defeated her at Gwalior, or whether they were just destroyed but it would be the dream of an academic, but also a personal dream to be able to find those box of letters, or to find something in her own hand or her own writing or something where she’s not just talking for Jhansi, she’s talking about the ‘I.’ “Only one kind of heroism was available to anyone in the public sphere if you were a woman.

Or to be heroic you had to die on the battlefield, and I saw women doing heroic things every day in their lives and it was never elevated to that level.

It is a complicated thing when we’re talking about warriors who were women Warriors should really be gender, you know agnostic. To be a warrior should not be female or woman or in any way gendered, but rather just warriors, you know? I always say when people say women warriors, I say “you mean warriors who happen to be women?” Because we never say that when we talk about men.

I hope at a personal level, you know that the Rani continues to give me you know, not just inspiration to be some kind of warrior but really think about what it means to be thought of as a warrior in this world, where often time the larger narrative, the larger than life narrative of the public sphere precludes the very small rebellions and heroisms that women live with in their lives, every day.

If you have enjoyed this episode of Warrior Women, there are more available in the series.

This episode was written using the following sources:

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