

### The Brave Rani of Jhansi

Adapted from Sandhya Rao's story

When Lakshmibai was born in **Benaras**, the wise ones said she would become a queen. Her parents, **Moropant Tambe** and **Bhagirathibai** named her **Manikarnika** after the river Ganga. Her mother told her many stories from the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha, and **Manu**, as she was called, was very happy. Unfortunately Bhagirathibai died all of a sudden when Manu was only four. Moropant Tambe moved to a place called **Bithur**. There he worked for **Baji Rao II**, who had once been the Peshwa. 'Peshwa' was the title given to the Maratha ruler. Manu was not sad for long in Bithur. She quickly made friends with the boys, **Nana Sahib** and **Tantia Tope**. Nana Sahib was Baji Rao's adopted son.

With them, she learned to ride and shoot. She also went to school, although in those days girls were not taught to read and write. She was called '**Chhabili**'- the sweet one - by everyone, including Baji Rao.

Because of her charm and wit, **Gangadhar Rao**, the king of Jhansi, married her after the death of his first wife, Ramabai who had died without a child. When Gangadhar Rao married Manu, she was only 15 and she was a child herself. The bride was given a new name, Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi. The people of Jhansi welcomed Lakshmibai into their hearts and she loved them too.

Think of **1857** and you think of the Rani of Jhansi, one of India's bravest women. That was the year when the Indian soldiers openly turned against their masters, the British. It was the first organized fight back and Indians called this their First War of Independence. It was also known as '**Sepoy Mutiny**'. It was a revolt against the British Government. Lakshmibai too joined that mutiny in 1858 after she had become the Rani of Jhansi.

Soon, the people of Jhansi were thrilled to know that their king at last had an heir. Yes, Lakshmibai had given birth to a baby boy in 1851. But this joy and happiness did not last as the baby died after three months and the people were heartbroken.

In those days, it was common for the rulers to adopt a child if they did not have children.

So the king, Gangadhar Rao chose five year-old Anand Rao, his cousin's child, to be his adopted son. On the eve of the adoption, on November 19, 1853, a colourful ceremony was held and Anand Rao was renamed **Damodar Rao Gangadhar**. The British were informed of the adoption by the king who told them that his queen, Lakshmibai, would rule Jhansi until the boy grew up. Soon after he had made the adoption, the perils began with the death of Gangadhar Rao. The Governor General **Lord Dalhousie** announced that he was taking over Jhansi, since the British did not accept an adopted child as a legal heir to the throne. This was only a cunning plan on the part of the British to take over the land.

This clever way of acquiring new territories for their Empire was called the **Doctrine of Lapse**, that is, if an Indian ruler died without a natural heir, the British simply took over his or her

kingdom. The kingdom or state lapsed into the British. But L a k s h m i b a i w a s determined not to g i v e u p J h a n s i . However all her efforts became futile and she wept alone in her room the whole night.

She was only nineteen years old! She decided to leave the fort as ordered by the British and went to live in a palace in the town with Damodar, her adopted son. The British began to govern Jhansi.

In the palace, Lakshmibai led a quiet life. She taught Damodar to fence and ride, read and write. Even then, she did not stop writing to the British for justice. Three years had passed without any disruption. By 1857, the British occupied whole India and their armies were full of Indian soldiers . Not everybody, including the sepoys, was happy. They were very hurt because their officers had asked them to grease the new cartridges to be used in the rifles with fat from pigs and cows in order to smoothen the firing of the bullets.

India has always been a multi-cultural country. The Muslims did not touch pork. The Hindus did not touch beef. Though they had already faced many problems, this was the worst one. On a hot summer day in May, the sepoys of the Bengal Army in Meerut attacked their British officers and some officers were killed. The Sepoy Mutiny had begun! As the news spread across the central and the northern India, thousands of soldiers turned against their British officers. Very soon the mutiny spread to Jhansi. The British were helpless to control the mutineers. They appealed to Lakshmibai to advise her soldiers to return quietly to their camps. Instead, she decided to join this fight against the British. Her war for independence had really begun.

First of all, she dug up all the piles of ammunition that had been hidden secretly and set up two new factories to manufacture rifles and swords. Thousands, including women were trained. She had a strong and loyal army, headed by both men and women. Lakshmibai was galloping from one place to another on a horse to supervise all the activities. She became one of the toughest rulers of Jhansi!

The British, on seeing Lakshmibai's leadership wanted to capture her. **Sir Hugh Rose** was given the task. His army reached Jhansi. Though Lakshmibai's loyal army fought the British furiously, they were pushed back by the enemy's guns. The British cannons blasted a huge hole in the wall of Jhansi's fort and rushed into Jhansi.

It was a terrible fight. Even though a large number of Lakshmibai's soldiers were killed, the British could not catch Lakshmibai as she had escaped with Damodar to **Kalpi**. Accompanied by her faithful followers and friends, she went to Gwalior to seek the support of Scindia of Gwalior. Though **Scindia** was on the British side, his soldiers deserted him and supported Lakshmibai to fight against the British.

She gained fame far and wide and she asserted, "We must prepare ourselves for another onslaught." However Rose was back with more men and more arms, waiting outside the Gwalior Fort. Once again there was a terrible battle. Lakshmibai sat on her horse, holding the

reins between her teeth and a sword in each hand. Her eyes glittered with fire and her swords caught the sunlight when she fought bravely. But on the third day of the war, she was shot at. The brave Rani of Jhansi laid down her life for her people. She was only **twenty three** then. Her soldiers huddled together in shock. She whispered in her last breath, "Give my jewels to my soldiers and look after little Damodar." The moment Lakshmibai died, the Peshwa army lost hope and the Sepoy Mutiny came to an end. The history of India is with full of stories of the brave. No doubt, Lakshmibai is probably the most famous Indian woman to have defied the British.

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