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Valorous Warrior Queens of India

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While Durga and Kali (the Warrior Goddesses) are manifestations of Devi Parvati or Shakti in Indian mythology, religion and culture, this country boasts of countless real, human Warrior Queens, who contributed in countless ways to Indian history. These valiant women warriors fearlessly fought for the country, in spite of being involved in family life and having their own children and kingdom to take care of.



Bharat Mata - Poster

In this month's article, we bring you the stories of some of the bravest women warriors of Indian history.

Rani Laxmibai - 1828-1858

Rani Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi, was the Queen of the princely state of Jhansi, in North India, currently situated in the district of Uttar Pradesh. She was one of the pivotal figures of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and became a symbol of resistance to the British Raj.

Early Life

Rani Lakshmibai was born on November 19, 1828, in the town of Varanasi. Born into a Marathi Karhade Brahmin family, she was named Manikarnika Tambe and was nicknamed Manu. Her father was Moropant Tambe and her mother, Bhagirathi Bai Sapre. Her mother passed on when

she was just four years old and her father was the Commander of the War of Kalyanpranth. He worked for Peshwa Baji Rao II of Bithoor district.

The Peshwa was very fond of little Manu and called her "Chhabili", which means, "playful". She received home education and so, could read and write. This made her independent and more fearless than the others in her age group. She also trained in shooting, horsemanship, fencing and mallakhamba; a traditional Indian sport, involving gymnastics, while dangling from a rope. Nana Sahib and Tatya Tope were her closest friends right from childhood. This went against many of the expectations for women in those patriarchal times in India.

According to historians, though she had quite a few horses, her favourite one was Baadal. She escaped from the fort on that very horse in 1858.



Queen Lakshmibai - Poster

Marriage

Manikarnika was married to Gangadhar Rao Newalkar, the Maharaja of Jhansi, in May 1842. She then came to be known as Lakshmibai (or Laxmibai). In due course of time, she gave birth to a boy, later named Damodar Rao, in 1851. He died after four months. The Maharaja then adopted a child, who he named Anand Rao. The boy was actually his own cousin's son. He was later renamed Damodar Rao. The adoption took place in the presence of the British political officer, who was instructed to let the Government know that this boy was now the heir and was to be treated with respect and the greatest regard.

The Maharaja died the next day. After his death, the British East India Company, under Governor-General Lord Dalhousie, applied the Doctrine of Lapse and laid claim to the throne of Jhansi, also annexing the state to its territories. When the widowed Lakshmibai came to know of this, she swore never to give away her kingdom. In March 1854, Rani Lakshmibai was given an annual pension of Rs.60,000, and was asked to leave the palace and the fort.

The Start of the Rebellion (1857)

Lakshmibai was known to exercise regularly, also training in weightlifting, wrestling and steeplechasing. She was much respected for her simplicity of dress and behaviour, her intelligence and her capabilities as a ruler.

On May 19, 1857, the Indian Rebellion started in Meerut. When Lakshmibai came to know of this, she requested the British political officer, Captain Alexander Skene, to permit her to raise a body of armed men for her own protection. Not sensing anything amiss, Skene agreed to it.

In the summer of 1857, the Rani conducted an elaborate Haldi-Kumkum ceremony (an auspicious ceremony for married women, wherein they are gifted turmeric, vermilion and so on) and managed to convince them to rebel against the British.

In June 1857, rebels of the 12th Bengal Native Infantry seized the Star Fort of Jhansi. They promised the British that they would not harm them and convinced them to lay down their arms. They then went back on their word and massacred 40-60 European officers, along with their families. Some experts believe that the Rani had a hand in this large-scale massacre, though nothing has been proved yet.

Four days later, the sepoys left the kingdom, after being paid a hefty sum of money by the Rani. Before they left, though, they swore that they would blow up the palace where she lived. After this incident, the Commission of Saugor (now, Sagar in Madhya Pradesh), Major Erskine, wrote to her, requesting her to "manage the District for the British Government", until a British Superintendent arrived. The Rani then also managed to defeat, capture and imprison rival Prince Sadashiv Rao (nephew of Maharaja Gangadhar Rao), who tried to lay claim on the throne.

Later, there was another invasion by the forces of Company Allies, Orchha and Datia. Their main aim was to divide Jhansi between themselves. Rani Lakshmibai immediately applied for British help, but due to the fact that they believed that she was responsible for the aforementioned massacre, they refused to respond to her.

The Rani then set up a foundry herself, to cast cannon to be used on the walls of the fort. She also assembled forces and trained them. They were able to defeat the invaders in August 1857. Then, she was still holding Jhansi on behalf of the British.

Siege of Jhansi

From August 1857 to January 1858, there was peace in the kingdom. The British promised that they would send troops to maintain control, but when they went back on their word, the Rani's advisors stressed the need to be independent from the British Raj.

When the British forces finally arrived in March that year, they found the kingdom was well-guarded and capable of taking care of itself. The fort had heavy guns, which could fire over the town and even reach the neighbouring kingdom.

Hugh Rose, who was commanding the British forces, demanded the Rani to surrender the city and threatened an attack if he was denied his demands. After thinking about it, the Rani announced that they were ready to fight for independence. She fearlessly defended her kingdom when Sir Hugh Rose besieged it on March 23, 1858.

She sent an appeal for help to Tatyasaheb, who arrived with an army of over 20,000. They, however, were defeated at the hands of the British on March 31. The British forces then lay siege on the fort and it was decided that by April 2nd, an assault would be launched and that the walls of the fort would be breached.

The Rani still continued to fight. Defences were placed in different points and those trying to scale the walls of the fort came under heavy fire. The army resisted every move of the British forces - the latter came under attack in every street and in every room of the palace. Finally, the Rani moved from the palace to the fort and was advised to leave and join either Tatyasaheb or Rao Sahib (Nana Sahib's nephew).

Lakshmibai got onto her horse, Badal, with little Damodar Rao tied to her back. She jumped off from the fort. It is believed that both of them survived it, but the horse died. This image of Rani Lakshmibai, with Damodar Rao clutching her, has become iconic with her story.

The Queen escaped in the night with her son, protected by guards and escorts. They all occupied the town of Kalpi. On May 22, British forces attacked Kalpi. The Rani and her army fought bravely, but were defeated.

Journey to Gwalior

Rani Laxmibai, Taty Tope, the Nawab of Banda and Rao Sahib fled once more; this time, to Gwalior. They joined the Indian forces, who had taken the city from Maharaja Scindia. They wanted to occupy the Gwalior Fort. The rebel forces were only too happy to cooperate and they named Nana Sahib as Peshwa of a revived dominion.



Gwalior Fort - Madhya Pradesh, India - Photographic Print

The Rani tried to persuade the rebel leaders to defend Gwalior against British attack, but failed to do so. She knew there would be an invasion soon. Sure enough, General Rose and his forces took Morar on June 16 and also made a successful attack on the city.

The Rani Meets Her End

On June 17 in Kotah-ki-Serai near the Phool Bagh of Gwalior, a squadron of the 8th Hussars, under Captain Heneage, challenged the Indian force, commanded by Rani Lakshmibai. She was trying to leave the region, but when the attack came, she chose to stay and fend off the enemies. The 8th Hussars slaughtered 5,000 Indian soldiers. They then continued to charge right through the Phool Bagh encampment.

In this duel, the Rani is believed to have put on a sowar's uniform and attacked one of the Hussars. She was off her horse and was obviously wounded, but carried on fighting. Shortly after, as she sat there bleeding by the roadside, she recognized the soldier and fired at him with a pistol.

According to another version, she was dressed as a cavalry leader and was seriously wounded. However, not wishing the British to capture her body, she asked a hermit to burn it, after her death. She passed away soon and a few local people got together and cremated her.

After three days, the British captured the city of Gwalior. Hugh Rose later commented that Lakshmibai was "personable, clever and beautiful" and was also "the most dangerous of all Indian leaders".

Her tomb now lies in the Phool Bagh area. She lived and died for her kingdom and for her country. Her contribution to Indian history remains unparalleled.

In Art and Culture

- Rani Lakshmi Bai's statues can be seen in many places all over India. Apart from that, several schools, colleges and Universities are named after her.
- The Rani Jhansi Marine National Park is situated in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- A woman's unit of the Indian National Army was named the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.
- In 1957, two postage stamps were issued to commemorate the centenary of the great leader.
- One can find numerous books, novels, poems, ballads, plays, films and songs in praise of the valorous Rani Lakshmi Bai.
- There are even video games representing the bravery of this woman warrior.

Ahilyabai Holkar - 1725-1795

Ahilyabai Holkar was the Commander of the Maratha Empire. Born in the village of Chaundi in Jamkhed, Ahmednagar, in Maharashtra, she moved to Maheshwar, South of Indore, on the Narmada River.

Ahilyabai's husband Khanderao Holkar was killed during the battle of Kumbher in 1754. Twelve years later, her father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, also died. One year after that, she took over the reins of the Holkar fief. Wanting to protect her land from invaders, she personally led armies in battle. She appointed Tukoji Rao Holkar as the Chief of her militia. More importantly, she was also a great pioneer and builder of Hindu temples. She built hundreds of temples and Dharmashalas all over India.

Life

Ahilyabai was born on May 31, 1725, to Mankoji Rao Shinde. He was the Patil (head) of the village. Though women did not go to school in those times, her father taught her to read and write.

Ahilyabai's future father-in-law, Malhar Rao Holkar, was a commander of the Maratha Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao and the Lord of the Malwa territory. He stopped in Chaundi while on a trip to Pune. As per legend, he saw eight-year-old Ahilyabai at the temple. Recognizing her piety and character, he brought her to the Holkar territory as a bride for his son. She married Khanderao Holkar in 1733. In 1745, she gave birth to their son, Malerao and in 1748, a daughter, named Muktabai. Malerao was mentally unwell and died in 1767.

She got her daughter married off to Yashwantrao, who was poor, but was brave enough to defeat a band of dacoits.

Reign

Khandekar Holkar had laid siege on Kumbher fort of Jat Maharaja Suraj Mal of the Bharatpur State. The latter had sided with the Mughal Emperor, Ahmad Shad Bahadur's rebellious wazir, Safdar Jang. During the battle, Khanderao was inspecting his troops in an open palanquin, when he was hit by a cannonball from the Jat army.

After his death, Ahilyabai's father-in-law prevented her from jumping into her husband's pyre and committing Sati. Malerao Holkar then ascended the throne of Indore in 1766, under the supervision of Ahilyabai. But he too died within a few months. She then became the ruler and reigning Queen of Indore.

Already trained to rule a kingdom, she petitioned the Peshwa to take over the administration herself. While many in Malwa objected to having a female ruler, the entire Holkar army supported her. She fearlessly led them with four bows and quivers of arrows fitted onto the

corners of the howdah of her favourite elephant.

The Peshwa granted her permission on December 11, 1767. With Subhedar Tukoji Rao Holkar (Malhar Rao's adopted son) as the head of her militia, she proceeded to take full reign of her kingdom. Ahilyabai received a daily audience wishing to come to her to solve their problems - she was always available to anyone that wanted her guidance and advice.

Soon, the small village of Indore grew and prospered to become a beautiful city. Her capital, though, was near Maheshwar, a town on the banks of River Narmada. She built roads and forts in Malwa, sponsored festivals and events, gave donations and wholeheartedly supported many Hindu temples.

Outside Malwa, she built numerous temples, ghats, wells, tanks and Dharmashalas (rest-houses) across an area between the Himalayas and pilgrimage sites in South India. Some of the most important ones are in Kashi, Gaya, Somnath, Ayodhya, Mathura, Haridwar, Kanchi, Badrinarayan and Rameshwaram. She also supported farmers, cultivators and merchants and helped them prosper in their respective fields.

Ahilyadevi was known for her kindness and generous spirit. Once, when her minister denied adoption unless he was offered a bribe, she is said to have sponsored the child herself, also giving him clothes and jewels. When she was unable to peacefully resolve the fight between the Bhils and the Gonds; who had plundered her territory; she actually granted them waste hilly lands and even the right to a small duty on goods passing through that area. That was the level of compassion that she had, for everyone.

Her capital, Maheshwar, was always filled with literary, musical, artistic, textile and industrial enterprise. She patronized several artists, poets, scholars, sculptors and craftsmen. These artists regularly received salaries and awards.

Death

Ahilyabai died on August 13, 1795. She was 70 years old - her reign lasted for 30 years. The Queen is remembered for having brought in the golden age to Indore's history, during her reign. She was succeeded by Tukoji Rao Holkar I, her commander-in-chief. In 1797, he abdicated the throne in favour of his son, Kashi Rao Holkar. Though Ahilyabai was a woman of modern times, her daughter committed Sati when she lost her husband, Yashwantrao Phanse.

Legacy

Ahilyabai's intelligence, good humour and compassion for others won the regard and respect of her subject and all others who came in touch with her. Also, like the rest of the Holkar family, she never used public funds to meet her own expenses. Many regarded her as a manifestation of the Devi herself. A fine politician and statesman, she ruled well, helping her kingdom to prosper in every way. Her subjects were always happy and were never in need of anything.

Works

She inherited a massive sum of personal funds, which, at that time, was estimated to be about sixteen crore rupees. She used the personal fund to carry out her charitable work.

As mentioned earlier, she built hundreds of temples and Dharmashalas all over India. She also gave generously to support these temples and rest-houses. Some of the most important works that she commissioned included the follows:

- Amarkantak- Shri Vishweshwar Temple, Kotithirth Temple, Gomukhi Temple, Dharamshala, Vansh Kund

- Ayodhya - Shri Ram Temple, Shri Treta Ram Temple, Shri Bhairav Temple, Nageshwar/Siddhnath Temple, Sharayu Ghat and Dharamshalas
- Badrinath - Badrinath Temple, Shri Kedareshwar and Hari Temples, Dharamshalas, Garden and Warm Water Kund at Dev Prayag,
- Belur - Ganpati, Pandurang, Jaleshwar, Khandoba, Tirthraj and Fire temples
- Chaundi - Chaudeshwaridevi Temple, sineshwar Mahadev temple,
- Chitrakoot - Pranpratishta of Shri Ramchandra
- Ahilyeshwar Temple, Dharamshala, Ghat,
- Dwarka (Gujarat) - Mohatajkhana, Pooja House and gave some villages to priest
- Gangotri - Vishwanath, Kedarnath, Annapurna, and Bhairav Temples, many Dharmashalas
- Grishneshwar - Shiva temple and Shivalaya Tirth
- Maheshwar - Hundreds of temples, ghats, dharmashalas and houses
- Nathdwara - Ahilya Kund, Temple, Well
- Omkareshwar - Mameshwar Mahadev, Amaleshwar, Trambakeshwar Temples, Gauri Somnath Temple, Dharmashalas, Wells
- Panchvati - Shri Ram Temple, Gora Mahadev temple, Dharmashala, Vishweshwar Temple, Ramghat, Dharmashala
- Rameswaram - Hanuman Temple, Shri Radha Krishna Temple, Dharmashala, Well, Garden etc.
- Puri - Shri Ramchandra Temple, Dharmashala and Garden
- Rishikesh - Many temples including Shrinathji and Govardhan ram temples
- Saurashtra - Somnath Temple in 1785
- Srisailam - Mallikarjuna Swamy Temple
- Ujjain - Chintaman Ganapati, Janardhan, Shrilila urushottam, Balaji Tilakeshwar, Ramjanaki Ras Mandal, Gopal, Chitnis, Balaji, Ankpal, Shiv, and many other temples, 13 ghats, well and many Dharmashalas, etc.
- Varanasi - Kashi Vishwanath Temple (1780[17]), Shri Tarakeshwar, Shri Gangaji, Ahilya Dwarkeshwar, Gautameshwar, Many Shiva Temples; Ghats including Manikarnika Ghat, Dashashwamedh Ghat, Janana Ghat, Ahilya Ghat, Shitala Ghat; Uttarkashi Dharmashala, Rameshwar Panchkoshi Dharmashala, Kapila Dhara Dharmashala

In Popular Culture

- Several books have been written on Ahilyabai Holkar.
- Sumitra Mahajan, former Lok Sabha Speaker, has written a book, titled "Matoshree", based on her life.
- Several feature films, plays, television serials and documentaries have been made, narrating her life history.
- In Thane City in Maharashtra, a children's park and a road has been named after her.
- The Indore Airport is named Devi Ahilya Bai Holkar Airport, in her honour.
- Two Universities, named Devi Ahilya Vishwa Vidyalyaya in Indore and Punyashlok Ahilya Devi Holkar University in Solapur.

Kittur Chennamma - 1778-1829

Kittur (or Kitturu) Chennamma was a Queen of the Nayakas of the Kittur Kingdom, ruled by Mallarudra Sarja, who were vassals of the Maharaja of Mysore. She is remembered for having led an entire armed force against the British East India Company in 1824; resisting the doctrine of lapse; in order to protect her territory. Though she fought valiantly, she was defeated, imprisoned and eventually died in prison.

Chennamma was one of the first female freedom fighters to resist British colonization. She is highly respected in Karnataka and is a symbol of the Independence Movement in India.

Life

Kittur Rani Chennamma was born on October 23, 1778, in Kakati, a small hamlet in the present-day Belagavi District of Karnataka. Coming from the Lingayat community, she received training in horse riding, lancing and archery, right from a very young age. At the age of 14, she was married to Raja Mallasarja of the Desai family.

Resistance to the British Raj

Raja Mallasaja died in 1824, leaving behind his young wife, a younger son and a state that was in anarchy. To make things worse, the son too died later in 1824. The Rani was left to fend for herself and to take care of the state of Kittur and protect it from the British.

She adopted Shivalingappa the same year and made him heir to the throne. This irritated the East India Company, who ordered Shivalingappa's expulsion using the Doctrine of Lapse. This tenet was based on the idea that, in case the ruler of an independent state died without leaving a biological heir, the right of ruling the State would "lapse" to the sovereign. Thus, the state came under the administration of the Dharwad Collectorate in charge of St. John Thackeray, of which Mr. Chaplin was the commissioner. They issued a notice to Kittur to come under the British regime.

Rani Chennamma sent a letter to Mountstuart Elphinstone, the then Lieutenant-Governor of the Bombay Presidency. She pleaded of him to let her keep the state, but the request was turned down. Then there was only one way out - war. The British tried to confiscate the treasury of Kittur, valued at around 1.5 million rupees. They attacked with a force of over 20,000 men and nearly 500 guns.

During the first round of war in 1824, the British forces lost heavily and many were killed. Amatur Balappa, a lieutenant of Chennamma, was the one who caused most of the damage for the British. Two British officers Sir Walter Elliot and Mr. Stevenson, were taken hostages. The Rani later released them with an understanding with Chaplin, that the war would end that way.

However, Chaplin continued with the war and brought on more forces. Rani Chennamma, with the help of her lieutenants, Sangolli Ravanna and Gurusiddappa, fought fiercely, killing many more British officers. Sadly, though, she was eventually captured and imprisoned at the Bailhongal Fort, where she breathed her end on February 21, 1829.

Sangolli Ravanna, the army chief of Kittur, continued with the guerrilla war to 1829, until he too was captured. He wanted to install Shivalingappa as the ruler of the kingdom and that was why he continued to fight. Finally, his own uncle helped the British to capture him. He was hanged to death and Shivalingappa was arrested.

Chennamma's legacy and victory during the first war are still commemorated in Kittur. The Kittur Utsava is held annually between 22nd and 24th of October every year in her honour. This Utsava includes sports, cultural programmes and lectures by noteworthy historians, on the kingdom of Kittur and the extraordinary valour exhibited by Rani Chennamma.

Rani Chennamma's samadhi or place of burial is in Bailhongal Taluk.

In Popular Culture

- On September 11, 2007, a statue of Rani Chennamma was unveiled at the Indian Parliament Complex by Pratibha Patil, the then President of India. The statue was sculpted by Vijay Gaur and was donated by the Kittur Rani Chennamma Memorial Committee.
- There are other statues in her memory at Bangalore, Belgaum and, of course, Kittur.

- About 11 families have been identified as the descendants of Rani Chennamma. They reside in Kittur and Khanapur in Belagavi District and in Gadhinglai in Kolhapur District.
- The valour of Kittur Rani Chennamma is commemorated by folk, even today, in the form of songs, plays, ballads, lavani numbers and popular GiGi padas.
- One can find several films, based on her life story.
- The Indian Railways train, Rani Chennamma Express, connects Bangalore and Kolhapur.
- Belagavi boasts of a University in her name - the Rani Chennamma University.
- A commemorative postage stamp was released on October 23, 1977, by the Government of India.
- Kittur Chennamma is the name of a Martian vessel in the science fiction series, "The Expanse".

Keladi Chennamma

Keladi Chennamma was the Rani of the Keladi Kingdom in Karnataka. The daughter of Siddappa Shettar, a native merchant of Sagara, Karnataka, she went on to marry King Somashekara Nayaka in 1667 CE. Incidentally, Keladi Kingdom, which is also known as Bednur and Ikkeri, was formed after the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire.

After Somashekara's death in 1677, Chennamma ably handled the administration of the Keladi Nayaka dynasty. She reigned for 25 years, during which she repelled attacks by the Mughal Army, led by Aurangzeb. Her military base was located in Sagara. She was known to be a pious, virtuous, soft-spoken woman and a pragmatic administrator of her times.

During her reign, she also entered a trade agreement with the Portuguese, for commodities such as rice and pepper. Hence, she was fondly addressed as "Raina da Pimenta" or the "Pepper Queen", by the Portuguese. She also permitted them to build churches at Mirian, Honnavara, Chandravara and Kalyanpura.

She adopted Basappa Nayaka; the child of a close relative. He later went on to succeed the throne as Hiriya Basappa Nayaka.

Karnataka celebrates her legacy, along with Abbakka Rani, Kittur Chennamma, Belawadi Mallamma and Onake Obavva. The state respects them as its foremost warriors and patriots.

Fending Off Attackers

In the meantime, King Somashekara fell seriously ill. The Sultan of Bijapur heard this news and also knew that the state was now in the hands of a woman. Wanting to lay siege on the region, he sent a representative by the name of Jannopant to the Queen for negotiations. Close on Jannopant's heels, he also sent a big army under the command of Muzaffar Khan.

The Rani had already divined the Sultan's intentions, and so, she gave Jannopant an amount of three lakh rupees to form an agreement with the Sultan. Yet, the latter's army was marching toward Keladi.

She then trained soldiers and equipped them with enough ammunition for the upcoming war. In the meanwhile, Jannopant hired his people to kill the King, who was already ailing. Hearing the news of her husband's death, Chennamma was grief-stricken, but she decided it was now time to put up a good fight against the Mughals.

Her advisors told her to leave Bidanur for the time being. So, the throne, the treasury and all else that was valuable, was moved to Bhuvanagiri. Later, Chennamma was crowned Queen in the fortress of Bhuvanagiri. She brought great happiness, peace and prosperity to the town and to her subjects. She also slapped death penalties on Jannopant and others responsible for her husband's death.

Offering Resistance to Aurangzeb

Keladi Chennamma offered shelter to Rajaram Chhatrapati, the son of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who was fleeing from the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb. Seeing this, Aurangzeb attacked Keladi. Chennamma fought the war, was victorious and signed a treaty with the Mughals.

Keladi was one of the last to lose autonomy to Mysore rulers and, eventually, to the British. Chennamma's cabinet was headed by Timmanna Naik, who is believed to have been the descendant of a commander of Vijayanagara. In her leisure time, the Rani would meditate, pray and perform acts of charity and kindness. She gave generous gifts to Mutts and other religious institutions. She respected all religions and treated everyone equally.

She also gave her personal attention to her son's education and training. Every morning, she would go to the court hall and would stay there till mid-day, attending to her subjects, resolving their queries and problems. She would then discuss matters of statecraft with Basappa Nayaka and her other ministers and officers. After that, she would spend an hour giving alms to the needy.

Chennamma Repels Mysore

Several times in the past, Mysore had attacked Keladi. Each time, the rulers of Mysore had been defeated. When Chennamma became ruler, Raja Chikkadevaraya Wodeyar was the ruler in Mysore. At that time, a person named Andhaka Venkata Nayaka, who belonged to Keladi, wrote to Wodeyar, requesting his help to get him the kingdom from Chennamma. He promised Wodeyar half the kingdom if he helped him seize the throne.

Confident that he would be able to win the war, Chikkadevaraya made preparations for the battle. He was also eyeing all the money from the foreign trade that the state was making.

Chennamma remained undaunted and sent a big army under the command of Bhadrappa Nayaka. The chieftains of Sode, Sirsi and Banavasi also jointly declared war on Keladi. But the Rani easily defeated them all.

The Mysore army attacked again the next year. They again got defeated and Chennamma captured many enemy soldiers and officers. But she also treated all of them with respect and also released them soon. This earned her the respect of Chikkadevaraya, which finally got him to sign a treaty of friendship between Mysore and Keladi.

Chennamma Negotiates Trade Treaties

The Rani also negotiated trade treaties with the Arabs to carry on trade along the seacoast. It generated more profits, made the land abundant and also offered her extra protection from enemies who were eyeing her territory.

In the meantime, her son came of age and was now an expert in statecraft. Intelligent, kind and generous, just like her, he was the ideal one to ascend the throne. In time, she handed over the major share of administration to him.

She then went on a pilgrimage to places such as the Aghoreshwara Temple at Ikkeri, the Mookambika Temple at Kollur and the Sharadamba Temple at Shringeri. She also captured Hulikere near Basavapattana and got the fort rebuilt. Once Basappa Nayaka ascended the throne, he renamed it as Chennagiri, in honour of his mother.

Death

After ruling righteously from 1671 to 1696, she knew her end was near. She called her son and advised him to live a life of piety, devotion and honesty. She then breathed her last in the holy month of Shravana. She was laid to rest in the Koppalu monastery in Bidanur. The life of Rani Chennamma of Keladi is indeed a source of inspiration to all those who love strong, independent, pure and pious women.

Razia Sultana - 1205-1240

Raziya al-Din, popularly addressed as Razia Sultana, was a ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. She is known for being the first female Muslim ruler of India.

Razia was a daughter of Mamluk Sultan Shamsuddin Itutmish, a Turkic slave (Mamluk) of Qutb al-Din Aibak. Her mother, Turkan Khatun, alias Qutub Begum, was a daughter of Qutb al-Din Aibak. Razia was the eldest daughter and, probably, was even their first-born.

Razia took over the task of administration from 1231-1232, when her father was occupied with the Gwalior campaign. According to legend, he was so pleased with his daughter's performance as ruler, that he went on to nominate her as his heir apparent, after coming back to Delhi. But eventually, he was succeeded by Razia's half-brother, Ruknuddin Firuz. His mother, Shah Turkan, plotted to execute her. During a rebellion against Ruknuddin, Razia instigated the public against Shah Turkan. She then reclaimed the throne after Ruknuddin was deposed in 1236.

Her ascension was challenged by a section of nobles. Some of them later joined her and the others were defeated. The Turkic nobles who joined her expected her to become their idol, but she continued to become increasingly arrogant with her power. This, along with her appointment of non-Turkic officers to vital posts, led to them going against her.

In April 1240, she was finally deposed by another group of nobles. She had then ruled for less than 4 years. She then married one of the rebels, Ikhtiyaruddin Altunia and tried to reclaim the throne once more. However, she was defeated by her half-brother, Muizuddin Bahram in October that same year. She was killed shortly after that.

Razia's name is also transliterated as Radiyya or Raziyya. The term "Sultana" is commonly used out of reference, as it literally means, "the King's wife", rather than a "female ruler". Razia's coins call her "Sultan Jalalat al-Duniya wal-Din" or "al-Sultan al-Muazzam Raziyyat al-Din bint al-Sultan". Incidentally, Sanskrit inscriptions of the Sultanate call her Jallaladina.

Ascension to the Throne

Itutmish had groomed his eldest son Nasiruddin Mahmud to become his successor. But the latter died suddenly in 1229. It is believed that the former thought that his other sons were unworthy of becoming rulers. So, he handed over administration to Razia. Impressed with her abilities as ruler, he ordered his officer mushrif-I mamlakat Tajul Mulk Mahmud Dabir to prepare a decree, naming her as the heir apparent.

Some records seem to suggest that, during his last years, he was willing to appoint a son as his successor. He was becoming seriously ill and recalled Ruknuddin from Lahore. Some experts think that he actually never appointed Razia as ruler and that it was only a false story circulated by her supporters.

Ruknuddin was not popular among the public and he handed over administration to his high-handed mother Shah Turkan. This led to further chaos and rebellions among nobles. Even the wazir (prime minister) Nizamul Mulk Junaidi joined the rebels.

Razia successfully instigated a mob against the mother-son duo. They attacked the royal palace and detained Shah Turkan. Razia then ascended the throne with help from several nobles. This made history, as she was the first even woman Muslim ruler in the whole of South Asia. In the meantime, Ruknuddin was imprisoned and probably executed in November 1236. He had ruled for under 7 months.

Razia Faces Opposition

Though Razia received much public support, several nobles of Turkic origin rebelled against her rule. Nizamul Mulk Muhammad Junaidi, a 'Tazik' (non-Turkic) officer, particularly opposed her. He was joined by four other nobles, who had also rebelled against Ruknuddin. When they marched against her from different directions, she sought the help of Malik Nusratuddin Taisi, who was eventually captured by Kuchi's forces and later, died in captivity.

Razia then led an army out of the city of Delhi and set up camps along the banks of River Yamuna. After a few initial spats, two rebel leaders secretly met with Razia and joined her. They planned to arrest the other rebel leaders. However, the latter came to know about it and escaped. Among them, some were captured, imprisoned and executed.

Reign

After getting back to power, Razia immediately made important appointments. She named Khwaja Muhazzabuddin as her new wazir and conferred the title Nizamul Mulk upon him. She also appointed Malik Saifuddin Aibek Bahtu as her army chief. But he died soon after. So Razia appointed Malik Qutubuddin Hasan Ghuri as the new army in-charge. She also appointed several of her loyalists to important household positions. During her tenure, she gave orders to conduct several military operations to lay seize on several other regions. She, however, was unsuccessful to capture Gwalior.

The Shias revolted against the Sultanate, but the rebellion was suppressed. Then, the Shia Qarmatians attacked Jama Masjid in Delhi. Their leader, Nuruddin Turk had gathered nearly 1,000 supporters from Delhi, Gujarat, Sindh and other places. On March 5, 1237 he and his army entered the mosque and killed the Sunnis assembled there for their regular Friday prayers.

Razia is Overthrown

As Razia attained more power and wealth, she grew increasingly arrogant. While the initial coins were issued in her father's name, she now insisted that they now carry solely her name. She also defied the purdah (veil) system prevalent then and started appearing in public dressed in traditional male attire, wearing a gaba (cloak) and kulah (hat). She paraded around the streets of Delhi on elephants, like the other Sultans. Additionally, the fact that she appointed non-Turkic officers to important posts, irked the Turkic officers.

In 1238-39, Malik Izzuddin Kabir Khan Ayaz, the then Governor of Lahore, rebelled against Razia. She marched against him, forcing him to flee to Sodhra. He was finally forced to surrender to her and accept her authority. She let him go, taking away the iqta (loosely meaning "fiefdom") of Lahore from him, but assigning him the iqta of Multan.

She then recalled Ikhtiyaruddin Aitigin, a Turkic slave, and made him Amir-I Hajib. She also called upon another slave of Itutmish, Ikhtiyaruddin Altunia, and assigned him the iqta of Baran and the iqta of Tabarhinda as well. They, however, conspired with other Turkic officers to overthrow her. She arrived in Delhi on April 3, 1240 and came to know about their plan.

Unaware that others too were conspiring against her, she marched towards Tabarhinda. There,

the rebel forces killed her loyalist Yaqut and imprisoned her.

Razia ruled for 3 years, 6 months and 6 days, before being overthrown.

Razia Meets Her End

When the news of her arrest reached Delhi, the rebel nobles appointed Muizuddin Bahram, a son of Itutmish, as the next ruler. The nobles expected him to be just a figurehead and were hoping to take actual control of the state through the newly-appointed regent, Ikhtiyaruddin Aitigin. But the new King assassinated him within the next couple of months.

After Aitigin's death, the nobles realized that they had no power now and joined forces with Razia. She too saw this as an opportunity to get back her throne. She married Altunia in September 1240.

Altunia assembled an army and in October 1240, Sultan Muizuddin Bahram led an army against the former. Altunia was defeated by him and he and Razia were forced to retreat to Kaithal, where they were abandoned by their own soldiers. Razia was killed on October 15, 1240.

Tomb

The tomb of Razia is situated at Mohalla Bulbuli Khana near Turkman Gate in Old Delhi. Some of her followers treated her gravestone as a pilgrimage site and, building a dome over it, sought her blessings. Her tomb is believed to have been built by Bahram. Another grave, next to hers, is said to be that of her sister, Shazia. Razia was a follower of the Sufi saint Shah Turkman Bayabani. Her tomb is said to be his hospice.

At present, this site lies neglected. It is approachable only through a narrow lane and is surrounded by illegal constructions. Some think that a dilapidated building in Kaithal is the site of Razia Sultana's original grave.

In Popular Culture

Razia Sultana is a popular figure in Indian history. Her life, story and valour is the subject of several films, documentaries and television series. One of the most popular Bollywood films, titled "Razia Sultan" (1983), features Hema Malini in the titular role.

Chand Bibi - 1550-1599

Sultana Chand Bibi was an Indian female Muslim warrior. She was the acting Regent of Bijapur from 1580-90 and also the Regent of Ahmednagar from 1596-99. She is best known for her valorous fight against the Mughal forces of Emperor Akbar in 1595.

Life

Chand Bibi was the daughter of Hussain Nizam Shah I of Ahmednagar, and the sister of Burhan Nizam Shah II, the Sultan of Ahmednagar. She was a linguist and was comfortable speaking many languages, including Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Kannada and Marathi. She was also very arty - she played the Sitar and painted flowers as a hobby.

Bijapur Sultanate

Chand Bibi was married to Ali Adil Shah I of the Bijapur Sultanate. A stepwell constructed by her husband, near Bijapur's eastern boundary, was renamed Chand Bawdi after their marriage. Ali Adil Shah's father, Ibrahim Adil Shah I, had divided the power between the Sunni nobles, the

Habshis and the Deccanis. However, Ali Adil Shah was on the side of the Shi'as.

After his death in 1580, the Shi'a nobles proclaimed that his nine-year-old nephew, Ibrahim Adil Shah II, would ascend the throne. At that time, a Deccani general called Kamal Khan seized power and became the ruler. Kamal Khan was not respectful towards Chand Bibi and so, she plotted an attack against him, with help from another general, Hahi Kishvar Khan. Kamal Khan fled, but was captured and beheaded in the fort.

Kishvar Khan then became the second ruler. In a battle against the Ahmednagar Sultanate at Dharaseo, the army led by him were victorious. They captured all the artillery and elephants of the enemy camp. After that, Kishvar Khan ordered the Bijapuri generals to surrender all those elephants to him. The generals took serious offence at this.

Along with Chand Bibi, they plotted to kill Kishvar Khan as well. They took the help of General Mustafa Khan of Bankapur for this. When the former came to know of this conspiracy, he sent troops against Mustafa Khan, who was captured and killed in battle. Chand Bibi then challenged him, but he got her imprisoned at the Satara Fort and tried to lay claim on the throne.

Kishvar Khan had become very unpopular among the rest of the generals. He was forced to flee when a joint army led by a Habshi general, Ikhlas Khan, marched towards Bijapur. Kishvar Khan escaped to Golconda, where he was killed by a relative of Mustafa Khan. After this, Chand Bibi was the acting regent for some time.

Ikhlas Khan then tried to ascend the throne, but was overthrown by Chand Bibi after a few days. He resumed his dictatorship, which was rejected by the other Habshi generals. Taking advantage of all this unrest, Ahmednagar's Nizam Shafi Sultan joined forces with the Qutb Shahi of Golconda and attacked Bijapur.

The Habshi generals realized that they could not fend off this attack and gave their resignation to Chand Bibi. Abu-ul-Hassan, a Shi'a general appointed by her, called for the Maratha forces' help. The Maratha forces successfully repelled the enemy camp and forced them to retreat.

Ahmednagar Sultanate

In 1591, Emperor Akbar ordered that all the four Deccan Sultanates acknowledge him as the supreme ruler. All of them tried to stall it. Akbar's ambassadors returned in 1593. In 1595, Ibrahim Nizam Shah, the ruler of Ahmednagar, was killed in battle at Shahdurg, against Ibrahim Adil Shah II of Bijapur. Some nobles felt that his infant son, Bahadur Shah, should be proclaimed as the heir to the throne, under the regency of Chand Bibi (his father's aunt).

However, the Deccani minister, Miyan Manju, decided that the twelve-year-old son of Shah Tahir Ahmad Nizam Shah II, should ascend the throne on August 6, 1595. The Habshi nobles were not agreeable with this plan and their rising resentment against him forced Miyan Manju to invite Akbar's son Murad Mirza to bring his army to Ahmednagar. Murad reached Malwa, where he joined hands with the Mughal forces led by Abdul Rahim Khan-I-Khana. Raja Ali Khan too allied with them at Mandu. This united army left for Ahmednagar.

While Murad was proceeding towards Ahmednagar, many noblemen left Ikhlas Khan and joined Miyan Manju. The latter defeated Ikhlas Khan and the others. He realized that he was not going to win this time and so, he requested Chand Bibi to accept the regency. He then left Ahmednagar with Ahmed Shah II. Ikhlas Khan escaped to Paithan, where he was attacked and defeated by the Mughals.

This way, Chand Bibi became the regent once again and proclaimed Bahadur Shah the King of Ahmednagar.

Chand Bibi Defends Ahmednagar

Ahmednagar was attacked by the Mughals in November 1595. Chand Bibi took the lead and successfully defended the fort. Later, Shah Murad sent an envoy as well. At that time, the troops were suffering due to severe famine in the area. Not wanting war now, she decided to make peace by ceding Berar to Murad.

She then asked her nephews Ibrahim Adil Shah II and Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah to unite against the Mughal forces. They jointly sent contingents of over 30,000 men. Chand Bibi made Muhammad Khan the minister, but he proved to be a traitor. He cosied up to Khan-I-Khana, offering to surrender the entire Sultanate to the Mughals. He also started taking possession of districts that were not included in the cession of Berar.

She asked Sohail Khan, the head of Ibrahim's army, to return and attack the traitor. Chand Bibi's united forces raised a fight against the Mughals near Sonpet, along the banks of River Godavari. On February 9, 1597, the Mughals won the battle. However, this terrible fight had drained out the Mughals and they returned to Sahpur. Raja Ali Khan was killed in the battle and there were frequent clashes between their own commanders. Khan-I-Khana was recalled by Akbar and Prince Murad died soon after that. Then, Akbar himself took his troops and set camp at Barhanpur.

Meanwhile, in Ahmednagar, Chand Bibi's authority was being resisted and the newly appointed minister, Nehang Khan, had recaptured the town of Beed. In 1599, Akbar asked his son Daniyal, Mirza Yusuf Khan and Khan-I-Khana to relieve the governor of Beed. Nehang Khan planned to seize the Jaipur Kotli pass, thinking that he would meet the Mughals there. But Daniyal avoided the pass and laid siege to the Ahmednagar Fort instead.

Chand Bibi fought valiantly to defend the fort. But her resistance was not strong enough. She was forced to negotiate terms with Daniyal. In the meantime, some noblemen spread the rumour that Chand Bibi was becoming treacherous and was selling her soul to the Mughals. She was killed by an enraged mob, which included her own troops. After her death, the Ahmednagar fort was captured by Daniyal and Mirza Yusuf Khan.

Chand Bibi Ka Mahal

Salabat Khan's tomb is commonly referred to as Chand Bibi ka Mahal. This is an octagonal dome, surrounded by a three-storeyed verandah. It is 100 feet high and almost the same in diameter. Presently, it is used as a military sanitarium.

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