I

Introduction

'The Rani of Jhansi asks me from the grave / Are we free and equal at last?'

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Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi, led her army against the British in 1857. The death of the king, Gangadhar Rao, had left the throne without a natural heir. The East India Company denied recognition to the adopted prince, or to the Queen as his regent and annexed the kingdom. Undeterred, Rani Lakshmi Bai took the reins of government, reorganised her forces and fought the colonialists. A figure of loss but not of defeat, the Rani lost her family, her kingdom and died in battle, but she also became a legendary figure in Indian history.

The 1857 rebellion is a watershed event in Indo-British colonial history that marked India's transformation from a mercantile colony to a dominion of the British crown and has since occupied an inordinately contested space in both British and Indian cultural mythology. Considered the 'First War of Independence' by nationalists and derided merely as a 'Mutiny' by colonial historiography, the rebellion has continued to provide a fraught terrain for the opposing transactions of British imperialism and Indian nationalism. On that discursive battlefield, the Rani herself, as the subject of numerous English romance novels, as a topic of debate in historical narratives, as the mobilising spirit in the rhetoric of Indian patriotism and as a celebrated figure in folk ballads and theatre, embodies an enduring enigma. Doubly articulated as history and metaphor, the Rani is crucial to disciplinary discourses that produce the historical subject within the colonial and postcolonial conceptualisations of gender, political power and resistance.

The exigencies of ideology and genre impinge on the numerous stories about the Rani, yet each account represents her both in the certainties of history and in the mythical modalities of legend. For example, a sensational anecdote claims that the Rani jumped, while astride her horse, from the ramparts of the Jhansi

fort, preferring death to surrender. In fact, most historical accounts affirm that she was killed in a pivotal battle against forces commanded by Sir Hugh Rose and presumably cremated by her soldiers before the English could retrieve the body. While British narratives foster the victorious notion of her obliteration, a sign of Britain's inevitable triumph, the absence of corporeal proof allows Indian accounts to construct her, and by extension the nation, as an undefeated figure.

The Rani's story was tempered for the Victorian reading masses through scores of popular romance novels and colonial historical accounts. In India, tales of the warrior queen remain emblematic of the anti-colonial struggle, which celebrates her as a harbinger of freedom. The details of her life remain ancillary to the dominant ideology of nineteenth century colonialism and twentieth century nationalism, which produce either a rebel without a justified cause or an ardent patriot. In both cases, competing discourses produce an unproblematic, unified version of the Rani. Yet, a study of these appropriations provides insight into a complex colonial episteme of the self and other and into the often-complicit postcolonial figurations, which are not bereft of contradiction or conflation. Inevitably, however, the figure of the warrior queen, jarring in the traditionally masculine spheres of war and politics, profoundly affects the very processes of cultural and literary narrative that strive to modulate her significance. These textual figurations of the Rani, ostensibly used to bolster British and Indian political stance, question the very assumption of unifying national principles that naturalise colonial and later postcolonial rule.

British Colonialism in India undertook many different and often contradictory, administrative and cultural strategies: the reformist impulses of the early nineteenth century gave way to draconian policies after 1857; Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858 gave Indians a stronger claim to the benefits of British rule as her majesty's subjects, yet the increased participation of Indians in public affairs and political office brought upon legislation in 1913 to protect 'the mystique of the (British) race'; the mutiny had brought to the fore the consequences of interfering with traditional culture and yet it was also evidence that categories of caste, religion and royal decree had to be reframed to better serve the colonial capitalist machinery.[2] The fictive restructuring of the Rani, from Aryan royalty to Indian whore, from worthy foe to bloodthirsty murderer, mirrors the ambivalent impulses of imperial policy and provides a site of convergence for the grid of colonial urgency invested in stabilising the empire after 1857. Victorian narratives about the Rani of Jhansi, whether extolling her courage or reviling her behaviour, reflect a crisis of authority that had to be resolved both through the continuity of links to the past but also through a recently energised and revamped template of governance for the future.

Viewed as a primal site of violence, India could no longer be represented as the land of the 'mild-hindoos' and colonial administration was restructured to manage racial, cultural and religious characterisations of the populace.[3] Amidst the taxonomies of loyal races and barbaric despots, a recurring gendered demarcation of masculine and effeminate stereotypes, regional and religious, gained credence. Primarily a move to restore order to a disrupted social and racial hierarchy, the transfer of power from the East India Company to the British maternal monarch elevated her from queen to empress. The story of an Indian queen who rode into battle against the British, retold during Victoria's reign, was as much an allegory of disobedient subjects as it was of unruly queens—displacing unto the colonial other the anxiety regarding a female monarch. Maria Jerinic reads the many colonial stories of the Rani of Jhansi as indicating a 'British discomfort with ruling women and consequently with their own queen. This interest in the Rani is tied to an imperialist vision, one that looks with suspicion on all female political involvement, British as well as Indian'.[4]

Nationalist concerns in postcolonial narratives follow a similarly gendered trajectory in creating a textual self for the Rani. She is not anomalous in the Hindu tradition where female warrior deities like Durga and Ambika are revered and the Hindi word for power, *Shakti*, is a linguistically feminine embodiment of the goddess. But the same rationale also relegates the Rani and similar historical figures to the space of myth and legend. Many other female rulers like Ahilya Bai Holkar, Rani Avantibai, Kitturu Rani Chennamma and Rani Durgavati are a part of Indian lore—yet, as the postcolonial nation prolifically recast her as a forerunner of Indian freedom, Rani Lakshmi Bai, the young, charismatic leader of the rebellion against the British, surpasses them all in public memory. This celebration of female power in the service of the nation is complicated, however, by the Hindutva politics in which women have played a significant role militating against other religious and cultural minorities. Amrita Basu's work on women in Hindu nationalism uncovers some of the complex interplay of factors behind women's participation in these chauvinist politics of religion and the nation, which do not challenge 'patriarchy in male-dominated societies'.[5] Similarly, the high degree of exposure accorded to the Rani of Jhansi is not at odds with the dictates of patriarchal nationalism. Tales of Hindu women in India, whether as military leaders or inspiring mothers, are foundational in the nationalist formations of gender.[6] As recently as 2007, Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, was depicted on a poster as the Rani of Jhansi, holding a sword and riding a horse with her son Rahul Gandhi on her back.

It was a telling moment in national politics and historical recasting when the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi was reconfigured as yet another incarnation of the Rani: 'The one who fought bravely was the queen of 10 Janpath, Delhi'. [*khoob lari mardaani woh to* 10 Janpath Delhi *waali Rani*.]

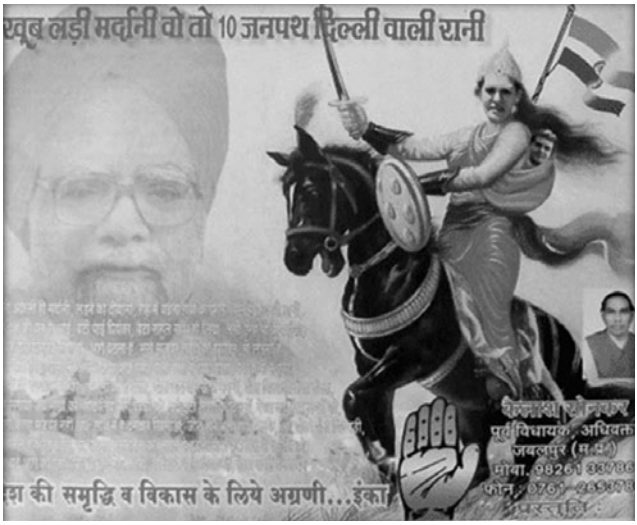

Figure 1: Congress Party poster from 2007

The political and military acumen of the national female leader remains secondary to her gendered identity. The many stories of Rani Lakshmi Bai do not extol women's aptitude to lead but are rather exemplary tales of women's ability to serve, in the tradition of the 'national family romance', the private and the public sphere as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters or even queens.[7]

Recent scholarship on South Asia, informed by postcolonial theory, has undertaken a nuanced comprehension of the dialogue between history and memory, of the continuities and disruptions of the oral and literary tradition in creating and preserving historical icons and of the reinvigoration of religious figures in public debates.[8] In a similar vein, this book is attentive to an archive of texts and practices – predicated on imperial designs and nationalist concerns – that literalise Rani Lakshmi Bai to contiguously present gender, history and fable in colonial and independent India. Fact and fiction, rationality and imagination, are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them from the Rani's life; fiction, in this case, has literally formed the historical. She continues to be a figure whose provenance is debated to this day, but the aim of this project is not to uncover the pure historical subject or to clear the Rani

of contaminating discourses. Instead, I investigate these narrative contexts to demonstrate the assimilative strategies and social formations that emerge around the figure of the colonial rebel woman and thus indicate the larger mapping of gender, nation, empire, literature and historiography. I use fictional, cinematic and popular representations to read an established feminist icon against the reification imposed by colonial and postcolonial modernity. Always a bit out of reach, jumping over the precipice at any discursive attempt to subdue her, the Rani's presence disrupts habits of literary historical narration, which restrict and codify even as they imagine this heroic legend. As Homi Bhabha points out: '[C]ultural strategy and political confrontation (are often) constituted in obscure, enigmatic symbols'—thus representations of Rani Lakshmi Bai serve as symbolic figurations through which displaced and not entirely coherent, anxieties about imperial and national interests are articulated, linking the past not only to the present but also to the future.[9] In short, this book engages with the Rani of Jhansi as a representational archive.

Figure 2: Examples of cover art from books on the Rani of Jhansi

1857

> It was alleged that, this being a mere military mutiny, all we had to do was to put it down…Now, I humbly think that the question of whether it is a mere military mutiny is one of primary importance. Is it a military mutiny or is it a national revolt? …The decline and fall of empires are not affairs of greased cartridges. Such results are occasioned by adequate causes and by the accumulation of adequate causes.
>
> Benjamin Disraeli[10]

The East India Company gained a substantial foothold in India with the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and extended its influence through conquest, treaty, legislation and reform in the hundred years till the revolt. While a combination of battle, alliance and annexation garnered valuable territory, a series of amendments to Indian religious, patriarchal, agricultural and military culture proclaimed the long-term colonial ambitions. The abolition of female infanticide in 1804 and of *sati* in 1829, the legalisation of remarriage for Hindu widows under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1856 and the growing emphasis on female education instilled resentment amongst various class and castes of the populace. Landowners disliked the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 that changed the Indian system of taxation; land owning shifted from the elite aristocracy to new Indian bureaucrats and merchants, thereby changing the social structure and validity of the *zamindari*.[11] The General Service Enlistment Act of 1856 took away the exemption sepoys enjoyed from taxation and also forced them to serve outside the geographic reach of their homeland.[12] Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India (1847–1856), began to enforce the infamous 'Doctrine of Lapse' and annexed the kingdom of Satara in 1849, Nagpur in 1853 and eventually the pivotal territory of Jhansi in 1854.[13] Despite this steady accumulation of grievances, both British and Indian scholars agree that the immediate cause of the rebellion was the Enfield rifle: the ends of the cartridges had to be bitten-off before the rifles could be loaded and rumour spread that these were greased with beef and pork lard. Panic and protest among Hindu and Muslim Sepoys, who viewed this as a defilement of their faiths, led to the insubordination of soldiers at Meerut in May 1857; and their subsequent punishment resulted in the 'mutiny' that sparked a large-scale rebellion. Thus, a combination of factors led distressed sepoys, displaced farmers and demoted rulers, independently and sometimes collectively, to different moments of insurgency that finally coalesced in the rebellion.

Much has been written about the 'Sepoy Mutiny' and India's 'Uprising' on both sides of the divide; I offer here a few notable examples of nineteenth century colonial historiography to provide the political and popular coordinates of this variegated narrative. Alexander Duff, the first missionary sent to India by the Church of Scotland, wrote one of the most frequently quoted contemporary accounts of the war, *The Indian Mutiny – Its Causes and Results* (1858) and insisted on the deep-seated hostility of the Indians to the British race. He wrote: 'The cartridge affair and its alleged caste-breaking tendencies were a mere shallow but plausible pretext in the hands of evil-minded, designing men and the real originating cause of the whole mischief would be found of a purely *political* character'.[14] Though he seeks to dissuade the reader from the view that unchecked conversions were the reason for the rebellion, this feint

falls short as Duff calls for a renewed missionary zeal to change '[T]he fiendish howl, which fosters and honours the degrading superstitions of Brahma and Mohammad, into millennial songs of gratitude and praise from the hearts of ransomed myriads'.[15] Thus, religion and race remain intertwined in Duff's account and while the colonialists are absolved of deliberately defiling Hindus and Muslims with the Enfield cartridges, the occasion becomes one more call to arms for the Christian crusade. The most quoted contemporary account of the rebellion, Sir John Kaye's *A History of the Sepoy War in India* (1864), cast the war as dissatisfaction of the priestly class of Hindus, thus drawing attention away from what Duff termed the 'political'. The Brahmins, Kaye wrote, were forced to defend their own privilege against the advent of British-introduced modernity – 'Every monstrous lie exploded, every abominable practice suppressed, was a blow struck at the Priesthood; for all these monstrosities and abominations had their root in Hindooism and could not be eradicated without sore disturbance and confusion of the soil'.[16] Even in *A History of the Sepoy War*, the dominant contentions are rooted in religious differences that form the basis for extending Britain's 'moral rule'. These accounts, whether they focused on an aggrieved religious caste or on the inherent malevolence of the natives, constructed an enemy that was innately brutal, ignorant, resistant to modernity and invariably rejected the 'gifts' of British rule.

In a speech to Parliament, Benjamin Disraeli detailed the religious and political interference of the East India Company in the tradition bound lives of the Indian people and insisted that it was the '[U]nion of missionary enterprise with the political power of the government' and the East India Company's 'principle of destroying Nationality' that led to the revolt.[17] David Urquhart, a member of Parliament in 1857, insisted, however, that the rebellion was nothing more than a Russian plot to destabilise British supremacy.[18] These legislative debates were as much about the political, racial, cultural and religious affiliations of the Indian as they were about appropriate and profitable governance. For instance, the nature and form of British law could no longer rely upon the liberal view espousing equality of all peoples but had to be reframed to consider the unbridgeable divide between the races. In contrast to observers like Duff, who saw the uprising as evidence of a great conspiracy, or, like Disraeli, who believed it was occasioned by unnecessary reforms undertaken by the East India Company, most British observers insisted that it was fundamentally an army mutiny. Sir John Lawrence, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi in 1857, reported,

> I have as yet neither seen nor heard anything to make me believe that any conspiracy existed beyond the army; and even in it, one can scarcely say there

> was a conspiracy. The cartridge question was to my mind, indubitably, the immediate cause of the revolt. But the army had for a long time been in an unsatisfactory state.[19]

Though Lawrence hones in on the Enfield cartridges, his allusion to the 'unsatisfactory state' of the army indicates complex and intersecting factors such as caste and regional allegiances that were often disrupted by military service, yet it relies mostly on the structural breakdown of military discipline.

Regardless of the ambivalence and ambiguity that beset colonial perceptions of what led to or transpired in the rebellion, the 'Mutiny-motif, effectively established a master-narrative of Indian unrest, a model for understanding and responding to subsequent crisis and this provided the mainspring for colonial anxieties in British India'.[20] In the Kuka Uprising in Punjab in 1872, prisoners were blown from canons to reenact the brutal reprisals of 1857 and to signal what awaited those attempting insurrection. In 1919, General Dyer opened fire on an unarmed crowd in Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar, an event precipitated by an attack on a British woman by Indian men – Dyer invoked the precedent of the 'mutiny', when White women were allegedly the target of native violence, as sufficient cause. 'From the rage and fear, of 1857 emerged a new and enduring sense of the importance of the bonds of race, in contrast to those of culture'.[21] Even as it seemed predicated on colonial mismanagement, the rebellion endowed colonialists with a particular kind of experiential knowledge that translated the suppression of the mutiny into the enduring superiority of the imperial White mission. Thus, 1857 functioned as a persistent metaphor of the colonial condition, which depended on a forceful rule of British law but also evinced the vulnerability of the empire manifest in the defenselessness of its outposts, its representatives and its women.

Unfortunately, Lord Canning's 'Control of the Press Act' banned publication of political and historical pamphlets in 1858 and except for Charles Metcalfe's translation of *Two Native Narratives of the Mutiny in Delhi* (1898), the poet Mirza Ghalib's diary *Dastanbuy*, Sambhu Chandra Mookerjee's *The Statements of Native Fidelity* published anonymously in 1858 and the recently translated memoir by Vishnubhatt Godse Versaikar, *1857: The Real Story of the Great Uprising*, scant else, in the form of Indian estimation from the nineteenth century, can be found about the war. In 1859, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan published *Asbab-e-Baghawath-e-Hind* (Causes of the Indian Revolt), but in a complicated series of events the text was hardly circulated in India and only a few copies were sent to England. In 1909, V.D. Savarkar published

The Indian War of Independence in Holland, which was immediately proscribed by the British authorities, but copies smuggled into India initiated a new series of interpretations that were pursued with greater scholarly rigour after independence in 1947.[22] S.B. Chaudhari's *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies* (1957) charted the histories of civil unrest and military insubordination under the Company's rule.[23] But the rebellion, according to Chaudhari, was not mere dissatisfaction but conscious political will, as never before had civil and military portions of the populace acted in congruence against the British. S.N. Sen argued against the notion of a nationalist uprising in *Eighteen Fifty-Seven*, characterising the tumultuous period as the almost inevitable consequence of a system where the rulers and ruled shared no common ties and yet where the power of enforcing control was to a remarkable extent in the hands of Indian soldiers.[24] R.C. Majumdar takes the realistic middle ground when he argues that '[T]o regard the outbreak of 1857 as a mutiny of sepoys is probably as a great an error as to look upon it as a national war of independence'.[25] Taking Majumdar's cue, it is perhaps most appropriate to term the events of 1857 a popular uprising; yet, the rebellion cannot be credited with uniform organising. A paucity of scholarship on the many communities who did not rebel, like the Gurkhas or the Sikhs, or on the majority of sepoys who kept faith with their employers and fought against their countrymen, forecloses the alternative narratives of the rebellion even on the Indian side. Thus, while social, economic, military and religious factors spurred an uprising comprised of a varied Indian demographic against an imperialist entity, it was also an occasion for the consolidation of power, military and monetary opportunism and a redistricting of traditional kingdoms to the benefit of many Indian rulers.

Present-day Indian and British historiography concedes that the revolt of 1857 was the result of many different motives. The rulers, the Zamindars, the Sepoys and the common people did not share a single agenda, but fought instead for various reasons against a common foe.[26] Though there was no overarching nationalist framework, the rebellion was subsequently mobilised as a moment of revolution in early twentieth century Indian nationalism. Recent scholarship from India, occasioned by the sesquicentennial of the rebellion in 2007, has undertaken both an evaluation of nomenclature (mutiny, uprising, rebellion and war of independence) as well as the recovery of primary Indian sources.[27] Scholars have focused on evaluating key historical texts; for example, K.C. Yadav has analysed J.W. Kaye's celebrated work *A History of the Sepoy War in India* (1878) and the more recent and aptly timed *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty* (2007) by William Dalrymple, to engage with shifts in

historiography. R.P. Singh has reread the works of Savarkar and S.N. Sen to sift through the different shards of thought that make up nationalist and postcolonial history.[28] Disciplinary modifications in historiography, along with the work of the Subaltern Studies Collective, have brought to the fore reactions and roles of hitherto ignored communities and individuals who took part in the uprising.[29] Studies by scholars such as Eric Stokes, *The Peasant Armed: The Indian Revolt of 1857* (1986), have focused on historical processes rather than on significant personages – an imperative that is much needed in India where the cult of a single personality often becomes the visible mobilising factor in national and regional politics.

Yet most scholarship remains governed by a geopolitical inheritance in which British and Indian opinion has mostly taken the expected stance and though 1857 sits richly caparisoned by scholarship and inquiry no definitive version or consensus has emerged. Where the colonial view perceives a lack of organisation and chaos the nationalists see a mandate of the masses and therefore the argument may never be settled. Political agency, as the dominant narrative implies, must be fixed in normative arenas of revolutionary organisations. The incredulous colonial descriptions regarding the rebels convey disbelief in the political nature of the 1857 revolt and since mutinous occasions are clearly outside civilised normal behaviour – they lose all claims to a transformative politics. But political agency in the nineteenth, or for that matter any century, is not a fixed inviolable phenomenon and must be located, in this case, in a series of contradictory and seemingly disjunctive events. As Stephen Howe points out, '[D]ebates on the meanings and legacies of Empire have become ever more closely intertwined with ones over national identity itself'.[30] Thus, how Britain views the 'mutiny' and India remembers its 'first war of independence', are intricately woven into the national fabric – British justification for its brutal reprisals depends on characterising the rebellion as an act of treachery, betrayal and disloyalty; rewriting the history and representation of 1857 permits the postcolonial Indian nation an anachronistic claim to a sustained narrative of resistance. Nevertheless, there is irrefutable evidence that an unpredictable Indian following and British fascination emerged around key figures such as Nana Saheb, his general Tantya Tope and their comrade-in-arms Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi.

The 1857 rebellion mobilised a great deal of rhetorical flourish even as it had far-reaching consequences for both countries. Characterised as a war between the Indians and the British, the blacks and the Whites, the heathens and the