

ISSN-0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-3 JUNE 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Book Review

Title of the Book: *Mahasweta Devi's The Queen of Jhansi: A Subaltern Study*

Author: P. V. Laxmiprasad

Publisher: HSRA Publications, Bangalore, India,

Publication Year: 2021

Pages: 184 pg.

Price: 449/-

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'Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi* : A Subaltern Study by P.V. Laxmiprasad, published by HSRA Publications in 2021, delves into the historical account of the Queen of Jhansi, presenting a subaltern perspective. The book is organized into five comprehensive chapters that meticulously explore the life and legacy of the queen, providing valuable insights into her role in India's freedom struggle. Laxmiprasad's writing style is characterized by meticulous research, attention to detail, and a nuanced analysis of historical sources. The book concludes with a compelling summary, offering a thought-provoking reflection on the significance of the queen's contributions. It includes a comprehensive list of works cited, highlighting the extensive research undertaken by the author. The book showcases the author's notable publications, demonstrating their expertise in the field of history and their dedication to producing insightful literature.

The book is a critical volume that delves into the life of Rani Lakshmibai, popularly known as the Queen of Jhansi, who played a significant role in India's struggle for independence. It is authored by P.V. Laxmiprasad, who brings his passion for history and his admiration for Rani Lakshmibai to this work. The book pays homage to Mahasweta Devi, an acclaimed Indian

writer and social activist. Mahasweta Devi's work often highlighted the struggles and experiences of marginalized and oppressed communities.

The book is divided into five chapters, each offering unique insights into different aspects of the subject matter. The first chapter, titled "Introduction of Mahasweta Devi," sets the stage by introducing the readers to Mahasweta Devi, a prominent figure in Indian literature and social activism. It provides a glimpse into her contributions and relevance to the book's theme. Moving forward, the second chapter, "Brief Survey of Indian History," provides a concise overview of India's historical context, giving readers a foundational understanding of the events and circumstances that shaped the country during the colonial era. Chapter three, titled "Subaltern Studies," delves deeper into the concept of subaltern perspectives and their significance in understanding marginalized voices in history. The subsequent chapter, "Introduction about Queen of Jhansi," focuses specifically on Rani Lakshmibai and her pivotal role in India's struggle for independence. Chapter five, "Critical Appreciation of The Queen of Jhansi," offers a detailed analysis and evaluation of the Queen's life, highlighting her bravery and contributions to the freedom movement. Finally, the book concludes with a chapter summarizing the key findings and a section listing the works cited, providing readers with a comprehensive list of references for further exploration. Laxmiprasad writes about a thought-provoking perspective on Indian history in the second chapter, providing a comprehensive analysis of the different periods and their impact on the country. He highlights the significant influence of European trading companies, particularly the British, who established themselves as the dominant power in India during the late 16th and 17th centuries. The author emphasizes that the British colonial rule brought about revolutionary changes in the social, political, and economic aspects of India. However, he also raises questions about the true nature of this rule and its impact on the Indian people. Laxmiprasad delves into the strategies employed by the British, such as the "divide-and-rule" approach, which pit Indians against each other based on religion and ultimately led to multiple mutinies and uprisings.

One of the crucial aspects Laxmiprasad explores is the struggle for Indian independence, highlighting the contributions of various leaders and freedom fighters. He challenges the dominant narrative, which often focuses on figures like Nehru and Gandhi, and emphasizes the need to acknowledge the roles played by other influential individuals such as Sardar Patel. The

author also acknowledges the sacrifices of Indian soldiers who fought alongside the British Indian Army during both World Wars, questioning the extent to which their involvement was voluntary. In his analysis, Laxmiprasad underscores the importance of recording history objectively and accurately, without overlooking the flaws and mistakes of the past. He argues against selectively deleting or omitting periods or events that may be considered unfavorable today. Instead, he advocates for filling gaps in historical records, providing a balanced and detailed account of India's rich heritage.

The author stresses the need for an unbiased and objective approach to writing history, free from the influence of political agendas. Laxmiprasad suggests that the task of chronicling history should be entrusted to a panel of eminent individuals, independent of political affiliations, who can provide a comprehensive and logical account of past events. By doing so, he believes that future generations can learn from the mistakes of the past and gain a deeper understanding of India's cultural and historical identity. Laxmiprasad's exploration of Indian history offers a thought-provoking perspective, challenging existing narratives and urging readers to critically examine the events and individuals that have shaped the nation. His call for an unbiased and comprehensive approach to recording history serves as a reminder of the importance of understanding the past in order to navigate the present and shape the future. The chapter titled "Subaltern Element" in the book deals with the concept of subaltern in the context of subaltern studies, which is a significant movement in postcolonial studies. The term "subaltern," as used by the subaltern studies group, refers to the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society, encompassing various aspects such as class, caste, age, gender, and office. Subaltern studies aim to uncover the histories of marginalized groups that have been neglected or undocumented in colonial and nationalist archives.

The subaltern studies group focuses on analyzing the binary relationship between the ruling classes and the subaltern, examining the dynamics of dominance and subordination within colonial systems, particularly in India. However, the methods and ideas of the movement have been applied to other nations and historical contexts as well. One of the main goals of subaltern studies is to recover, examine, and highlight the agency of the underclass within the frameworks of capitalism, colonialism, and nationalism. It challenges elitism and aims to bring forth the voices and experiences of the subaltern groups that have been marginalized in dominant

narratives. The chapter emphasizes that the autonomy, spontaneity, and consciousness of the subaltern are shaped in various ways. The forms of protest and resistance vary, and there are differences in goals and directions. The subaltern's understanding of nationalism and the freedom struggle is a central concern in subaltern studies. The concept of core and periphery is explored, with the middle class playing a role in the reformative process of Indian nationalism. However, the suffering of the working people during the capitalist transition led to a perpetuation of the core-periphery duality. The unity of the subaltern opposition is fragmented by the spaces provided by the core and periphery.

The chapter also discusses the concept of subaltern consciousness, which is viewed as a historical stage peculiar to the subaltern. However, there is a counterpoint suggesting that subaltern consciousness is subject to the mentality of the elite, never fully recoverable, always asked from received signifiers, evaded even as it is disclosed, and discursive. The term "subaltern" used by the subaltern studies group is not derived from the British colonial rank of "subaltern" but from Antonio Gramsci's use of the word in his prison notebooks. Subaltern studies seek to bridge the gap between the history of the elite and the history of the subaltern, challenging elitist biases in the field of historiography dominated by colonial and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. The chapter also highlights the salient features of subaltern studies. It emphasizes viewing the subaltern groups as subjects of history rather than objects, rejecting a teleological understanding of progress, and interrogating systems of silencing and oppression. Subaltern studies aim to uncover the discourses of dissent and resistance arising from everyday political action, giving voice to those usually excluded from the historical narrative.

Laxmiprasad refers to some critiques of subaltern studies. Scholars have expanded the concept of subalternity beyond its original configuration, applying it to any disenfranchised and oppressed population. Criticisms include the reduction of class to oversimplified dichotomies and the confinement of subaltern politics to the lower storey, thereby excluding transformative politics. Vivek Chibber's critique questions the explanatory framework and radical critique provided by subaltern studies, suggesting that it fails to deliver on its promises.

The author appreciates a few texts within subaltern studies. Shahid Amin's book "Event, Metaphor, Memory" examines the singular event of the Chauri Chaura arson and its context,

expanding the narrative to include multiple viewpoints. Dipesh Chakrabarty's work highlights the need to reinvestigate Indian histories and challenges the Eurocentric historicist framework.

Laxmiprasad's introduction provides an overview of Mahasweta Devi's work and her portrayal of Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi. Devi conducted extensive research, drawing from various sources such as family reminiscences, oral literature, and local histories to create a personal history of this legendary Indian heroine. Devi's work goes beyond a simple biography and delves into the history of resistance against British colonial rule. She presents Lakshmibai as a complex and spirited woman who defied traditional gender roles. Lakshmibai is depicted as a leader who wears male attire while riding a horse, yet she also displays warm concern for her soldiers and worries about her infant son. The book by Mahasweta Devi is described as a valuable contribution to feminist historiography, as it presents history from a perspective often overlooked by mainstream narratives. Devi's writing aims to reclaim history by giving voice to marginalized perspectives and challenging the dominance of white male authors in historical accounts.

The introduction shows that Mahasweta Devi's significant contributions as a Bengali writer and social activist. She focused on highlighting the injustices faced by India's poor and marginalized communities, particularly the Adivasi (indigenous) people. Devi's writings are rooted in her personal experiences and interactions with these communities, creating a seamless interplay between field experiences and textual representations. The recognition of Devi's work expanded globally with the English translation of her collection, "Imaginary Maps," by Gayatri Spivak Chakravorty, a renowned postcolonial intellectual. This translation brought Devi's powerful accounts of struggle and resistance to a wider audience. The introduction also emphasizes the significance of Devi's engagement with the rich oral tradition, myths, and storytelling of the Adivasi communities. Devi acknowledges the absence of written representation for these communities and highlights their history as a continuous and flowing river with a destination.

Laxmi Prasad's introduction presents Mahasweta Devi as a writer and activist who weaves together history, biography, and fiction to reclaim the narratives of marginalized individuals and challenge dominant perspectives in historiography. The chapter gives a historical account or a collection of arguments and opinions regarding the annexation of Jhansi by the

British during the colonial era in India. It discusses the reasons and justifications put forth by the British government for the annexation, as well as the response and resistance from the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmibai. The chapter also presents various viewpoints on the annexation, including arguments made by the British government to support their decision. These arguments include the absence of a male heir, Jhansi's status as a protected state, its historical connection to Orchha, and the potential benefits of annexation for the British administration.

However, the passage also mentions criticisms and opposition to the annexation. Some historians and writers, both British and Indian, argued against the decision, considering it unjust and lacking proper justification. They highlighted the loyalty of the rulers of Jhansi to the British and questioned the legality and fairness of the Doctrine of Lapse, which was used as a basis for annexation. The chapter also describes the reaction of Rani Lakshmibai to the annexation. It recounts her defiant response when Major Ellis arrived to read the order of annexation, stating, "Meri Jhansi doongi nahin" (I will not give up my Jhansi). Her resistance is portrayed as significant, as many rulers of Indian kingdoms at the time did not offer any resistance to British annexation.

It's important to note that the chapter appears to present a specific perspective on the events surrounding the annexation of Jhansi. While it provides insights into the arguments and sentiments of the time, it may not encompass the full historical context or represent all viewpoints on the matter. The chapter appears to be a historical account or a narrative description of events related to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, also known as the Sepoy Mutiny or the First War of Indian Independence. The rebellion was a significant uprising against British colonial rule in India, involving widespread discontent and resistance among Indian soldiers (sepoys) in the British East India Company's army, as well as civilians.

The chapter highlights various incidents and grievances that contributed to the growing discontent and ultimately led to the outbreak of the rebellion. These include instances of mistreatment, oppression, economic hardships, religious tensions, cultural disrespect, and acts of violence perpetrated by the British colonial rulers and their officers. The rebellion was a culmination of years of accumulated grievances and sparked widespread resistance across different regions of India. The chapter also mentions specific locations and events related to the rebellion, such as the revolt of the 64th Native Infantry, the actions of the young Sindhia

Jayajirao, the impact on rural areas like Ayodhya, the role of missionaries, the oppressive measures taken by the British, and the buildup of tensions in Jhansi. It also references the destruction of evidence by the British to suppress the rebellion's magnitude.

The chapter provides a glimpse into the various factors and incidents that contributed to the uprising of 1857 and the intense atmosphere of discontent and resistance prevailing in India during that period. The conclusion of the given text reflects the author's perspective on the historical figure of the Queen of Jhansi, also known as Laxmi Bai, and her portrayal in history books. The conclusion argues that the Queen's depiction in history has been influenced by colonial and nationalist agendas, rather than presenting her as a pioneering figure in India's freedom struggle. It suggests that historical records, including written sources from colonial and nationalist perspectives and oral sources such as folklore and memory, have shaped the narrative of the Queen's life.

The author, referencing the novel "Queen of Jhansi" by Mahasweta Devi, highlights the human element of Laxmi Bai's story and her role in the 1857 revolt. The purpose of Devi's work, as stated by the author, is to present the people's narrative about the Queen and emphasize her bravery and revolt. Despite the criticism against the Queen of Jhansi, the author defends her as a heroic figure who fought for her kingdom and people, sacrificing her life against the British. The author argues that the battle between the Queen and the British was not just a personal conflict but a struggle for power and control over the oppressed Indian population.

Even more, the conclusion suggests that the Queen's battle against the ruling class of British India represents a larger fight between the ruler and the ruled, reflecting the inequalities and injustices prevalent during that time. The author asserts that the Queen's legacy lives on in the hearts of Indians and that her martyrdom symbolizes the real history of India, overshadowing any achievements or contributions made by the British during their two-hundred-year rule. The work cited provides a list of primary and secondary sources used in the text, including works by scholars such as Dipesh Chakrabarty, Ranajit Guha, Gyanendra Pandey, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Furthermore, it offers a list of further reading and the author's own book publications on various literary and critical topics.

Thus, Laxmiprasad supports the view that the Queen of Jhansi should be regarded as a heroic figure in Indian history, highlighting the importance of understanding and interpreting

historical narratives through multiple perspectives and challenging the distortion of history for political and ideological purposes. Within the pages of 'The United States of India', a monthly review of the political, social, economic, and intellectual independence of Hindustan, an awe-inspiring tribute is bestowed upon the legendary Rani Laxmibai. As we delve into the archives of this historic publication, we uncover a poignant quote that beautifully captures the essence of her indelible legacy: The British may call this war a 'Mutiny' and they may give any other reason but the fact remains that the war was fought to clear out the foreign Intruders from India.

The book "Mahasweta Devi 's *The Queen of Jhansi* " is an essential read for anyone interested in uncovering the untold narratives and perspectives of historical figures. P.V. Laxmiprasad's meticulous research and nuanced analysis provide a fresh and insightful examination of the Queen of Jhansi's life and her significant role in India's freedom struggle. By adopting a subaltern approach, the book sheds light on the experiences of marginalized and oppressed individuals during that era, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the historical context. Laxmiprasad's attention to detail and thought-provoking insights make this book a valuable resource for scholars, history enthusiasts, and anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of colonial India. It challenges conventional narratives and invites readers to critically engage with the historical events and the subaltern perspectives that have often been overlooked. Through its compelling narrative and scholarly rigor, "Mahasweta Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*" enriches our understanding of history and highlights the importance of diverse perspectives in shaping our collective understanding of the past.