

STORIES OF OUR SHEROES



SRIDEVI



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A. Freedom Fighters





Abbakka Chowta

01. Abbakka Chowta

First of the Warrior Queens to Fight the Colonial Invasion
Born c. 1500s

Once upon a time, a feisty little princess was born into the Chowta family of Tulu Nadu, part of present-day Karnataka. Her name was Abbakka, and she was the first of the warrior queens who protected her kingdom fiercely from repeated invasions by the Portuguese.

The Chowta clan ruled Tulu Nadu and they were a matrilineal society where the women inherited titles and became heirs and rulers. As Abbakka was expected to take over the kingdom later, she was trained in sword fighting, archery, warfare and political tactics. Later, she became the queen of Tulu Nadu and ruled it efficiently.

In the 1500s, the spice and textile trade flourished between the western coastal regions of India, and the Arabs, Africans and Europeans. Around this time, the Portuguese were establishing themselves on the western coast of India, conquering little kingdoms, taking control of the trade routes and demanding trade taxes. Ullal was an important trading port of Tulu Nadu, and the Portuguese were keen on conquering it.

When Abbakka became the queen, she was determined to resist the Portuguese. She continued with the maritime trade and refused to pay the trade taxes demanded by them. Angered, the Portuguese attacked Ullal repeatedly.

In the 1550s, the first battle between the Chowta kingdom and the Portuguese fleet took place. Rani Abbakka and her army defended their kingdom successfully, making the Portuguese retreat. The Portuguese attacked the Chowta kingdom again a few years later but they failed once more. In a third battle, the Portuguese army captured Rani Abbakka's palace, but she escaped. She returned with her army and carried out a surprise attack, killing the Portuguese general and many of his soldiers.

As repeated attacks did not work, the Portuguese resorted to a different strategy. In the 1580s, a large Portuguese troop and a fleet of battleships commanded by the Portuguese Viceroy of Goa were sent to Ullal to launch a surprise attack. Rani Abbakka was caught off-guard this time, but she mustered her troops immediately and started a fierce counterattack.

Though many of the Portuguese ships were burnt in that battle, Rani Abbakka was severely wounded and captured. Sadly, she died in captivity, but her daughters continued to defend Tulu Nadu from the Portuguese following her footsteps. Abhaya Rani!

Honours & Awards: In 2023, India Post issued a stamp of Rs 5.00 honouring Abbakka Chowta and in 2015, the Indian Coast Guard named a patrol vessel *ICGS Rani Abbakka* as a tribute to her naval heroics.



Velu Nachiyar

02. Velu Nachiyar

First Queen to Fight the British Conquest
Born c. 1730

Once upon a time, a brave little princess was born in Ramnad kingdom, part of present-day Tamil Nadu. Her name was Velu Nachiyar, the daughter of a king of the Sethupathi dynasty. Velu Nachiyar went on to become the first queen to have fought against British rule (the East India Company), long before the sepoy mutiny.

Being a princess and the heir to the Ramnad kingdom, Velu Nachiyar received training in horse riding, archery and martial arts. She was also proficient in many languages including English, French and Urdu. She married the king of Sivaganga kingdom and had a daughter, Vellacci.

In 1772, the British East India Company and the Nawab of Arcot invaded the Kingdom of Sivaganga killing Velu Nachiyar's husband and capturing the Sivaganga Fort. Velu Nachiyar escaped with her daughter and took shelter in another small kingdom, the Palayam of Virupachi.

While in exile, Velu Nachiyar planned a revenge attack against the British East India Company to regain her kingdom, joining forces with Hyder Ali, the then Sultan of Mysore. Aided by Hyder Ali and also by Gopala Nayakkar of the Palayam of Virupachi, she formed an army of 5000 soldiers along with the Maruthu brothers who were the commanders of the Sivaganga kingdom. Her army, known as the Udayal Padaai, comprised several women soldiers.

In 1780, Velu Nachiyar planned to launch an attack against the British to regain control of the Sivaganga Fort. Her commander Kuyili destroyed all arms and ammunition stored by the British East India Company by setting herself on fire inside the armoury chamber and sacrificing her life. Simultaneously, Velu Nachiyar launched her attack and regained control of the Sivaganga Fort and kingdom.

Velu Nachiyar ruled the kingdom for ten more years and later the throne was inherited by her daughter Vellacci. From devising a military strategy and forming the necessary political alliances to defeating the invaders and regaining her lost kingdom, she was a manifestation of courage and perseverance. Veera Mangai!

Honours & Awards: In 2008, India Post released a commemorative Rs 5.00 postage stamp of Velu Nachiyar.



Kitturu Chennamma

03. Kitturu Chennamma

First Ruler to Revolt Against the Imposition of the Doctrine of Lapse
Born on October 23, 1778

Once upon a time, a daring little girl was born in Kakati, a village in Belagavi, part of present-day Karnataka. Her name was Chennamma, (also spelt as Channamma). She was the first Indian ruler to revolt against the British regime over their imposition of the Doctrine of Lapse.

Chennamma learned sword fighting and horse riding and grew up to be a strong and independent girl. Later, she married Raja Mallasarja of Kitturu* and became the Queen of Kitturu. They had a son, but sadly, both the king and the young prince died within a few years. Rani Chennamma then adopted another boy, Shivalingappa, and made him heir to the throne.

The British East India Company did not accept the regime change in Kitturu and enforced the Doctrine of Lapse on them. This policy was created by the East India Company and it let them annex any Indian princely state if its ruler died without a male heir. They ordered Shivalingappa's expulsion, brought Kitturu under their administration and notified Rani Chennamma. She was not happy about this and sent a letter to the Lieutenant-Governor of the Bombay Presidency, pleading the cause of Kitturu. But her request was turned down.

The British army attacked the defiant Kitturu. In the first battle, the British forces were defeated by the Kitturu army and the British officers were taken as hostages. Rani Chennamma released them only after an assurance from the British that they would end the war on Kitturu.

But the British went back on their word and launched another attack with a larger army. Rani Chennamma and her army fought fiercely, but they lost the war. It is believed that the Kitturu army was betrayed by traitors who mixed cow dung in gunpowder, making their weapons ineffective. Rani Chennamma was captured and imprisoned. Sadly, she died in British custody.

Though she was defeated in her last battle, Rani Chennamma is remembered and cherished for her bravery and resistance against British rule. Veera Rani!

* Kitturu, also spelt as Kittur, is part of present-day Karnataka and was the first princely state to be annexed by the British in 1824 using the Doctrine of Lapse.

Honours & Awards: In 1977, India Post released a commemorative 25 paise postage stamp in Rani Chennamma's honour. In 2007, her statue was unveiled at the Parliament complex in New Delhi by the President of India.



Laxmi Bai

04. Laxmi Bai

Principal Warrior of the Indian Mutiny of 1857
Born c. November 19, 1828

Once upon a time, a fiery little girl was born in Kashi, also known as Varanasi, part of present-day Uttar Pradesh. Her name was Manikarnika Tambe. Later known as Laxmi Bai, she played a leading role in the first major Indian Rebellion against the British in 1857.

As a young girl, Manikarnika was taught to read and write besides sword fighting and horse riding. She grew up to be a very confident and independent girl. While she was still in her teens, she got married to the then Maharaja of Jhansi and took a new name, Laxmi Bai. Jhansi was a princely state, part of present-day Uttar Pradesh.

Laxmi Bai and her husband Maharaja Gangadhar Rao had a son but the child died very young. They then adopted a boy to be raised as their heir. The Maharaja declared Laxmi Bai as the Queen of Jhansi before he died. After his death, Rani Laxmi Bai took over and ruled Jhansi on behalf of the minor heir.

Lord Dalhousie, the then British governor-general of India, refused to recognise Rani Laxmi Bai's reign and the adopted heir, and he tried to annex Jhansi as a British territory. He used the Doctrine of Lapse which allowed the British to annex Indian kingdoms that did not have a natural male heir. Rani Laxmi Bai was asked to leave the palace and the fort, but she refused to cede Jhansi to the British.

Around this time, the Indian Revolt of 1857 had broken out, spreading rapidly around the northern parts of India. Rani Laxmi Bai and her army joined the uprising against the British. The British forces tried to capture Jhansi, surrounding her fort. A fierce battle started and she did not surrender even when her troops were overpowered.

Rani Laxmi Bai escaped from the fort with her son surrounded by her guards. Along with other rebel leaders like Tantia Tope, she led their army and mounted several attacks on the British. They seized the fort of Gwalior and marched to confront another counterattack. Sadly, she was killed in this effort. It is said that she was dressed as a man when she fought this battle.

Rani Laxmi Bai is remembered even today as an iconic figure of the first major Indian rebellion against the British in 1857. The Symbol of Indian Mutiny!

Honours & Awards: In 1957, India Post issued a commemorative stamp of 15 paise in honour of Rani Laxmi Bai. The Indian Coast Guard ship *ICGS Lakshmi Bai* is named after her.



Annie Besant

05. Annie Besant

The Champion of Home Rule in India

Born on October 01, 1847

Once upon a time, a tenacious little girl named Annie Wood was born in London. More popularly known as Annie Besant, she was from Britain and of Irish descent. Annie made India her home and played a very important role in the Indian Freedom Movement besides being the first female president of the Indian National Congress.

Annie spent her initial years in the UK. After reading a book by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the co-founder of the Theosophical Society and later meeting her, Annie became interested in Theosophy, a religious movement based on a wide array of philosophies and religious concepts, including karma and reincarnation. As a member and later as the leader of the Theosophical Society, she helped spread its beliefs around the world.

Annie first visited India in 1893 as part of the Theosophical Society activities, but soon she made it her home. Along with her religious activities, she became involved in Indian political issues, particularly the Indian Nationalist Movement and joined the Indian National Congress.

In 1916, Annie established the Indian Home Rule League and became its president. The main objective of the league was to end British rule and bring in Indian governance. She and Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the Indian Nationalist, spread this message across the country and the movement soon gained momentum. Annie was arrested, but she continued to be defiant and even flew the Indian flag where she was confined.

The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League demanded Annie's release threatening to launch protests. The British Government was forced to free her and they agreed to work towards achieving self-rule by Indians. Annie soon took over as the President of the Indian National Congress and continued to campaign for India's independence, both in India and during her tours abroad. Sadly, she did not live long enough to see the nation achieve independence and self-rule.

Annie also founded schools and youth organisations with the aim to create new leadership for India. She founded the Central Hindu School which later became Benares Hindu University, the Young Men's India Association and the Indian Boys Scout Association. Engaging actively in various political and social causes, Annie contributed enormously towards a free and better India. A true Indian nationalist!

Honours & Awards: In 1963, the India Post issued a special 15 paise stamp honouring Annie Besant.



Bhikaiji Cama

06. Bhikaiji Cama

The Revolutionary Who Raised the First Indian Flag Abroad
Born on September 24, 1861

Once upon a time, a determined little girl was born in Navsari, then part of the Bombay Presidency and present-day Gujarat. Her name was Bhikaiji Patel. Later known as Bhikaiji Cama, she was the first woman to raise the first tricolour flag of India in an international conference, 40 years before Independence, and is regarded as the Mother of the Indian Revolution.

When Bhikaiji was growing up, the Indian Nationalist Movement was gaining momentum and she was drawn towards it. She was actively involved in the political and social issues of the time. Later, she married Rustomji Cama, a reputed lawyer and staunch supporter of the British. Ideological differences between them caused marital problems. To make matters worse, she was affected by the plague. So Bhikaiji left for London to rest and receive medical care.

In London, Bhikaiji met the Indian political leader Dadabhai Naoroji and other Indian nationalists. Inspired by them, she started participating in the Indian National Congress activities. Her involvement in political activities made the British government ban her return to India, forcing her to live in exile in Paris. While in Paris, she published and distributed revolutionary literature propagating the cause of Swaraj, along with other nationalists living in exile.

On August 22, 1907, Bhikaiji attended the International Socialist Congress at Stuttgart in Germany. She appealed for human rights, equality and autonomy for fellow Indians from Great Britain. It was on this occasion that she unfurled the Flag of Indian Independence – a tricolour flag designed by Bhikaiji and other leaders including Shyamji Krishna Verma and Vinayak Damodar Savarkar. It was the first version of the flag of independent India and came to be known as the Berlin Committee Flag.

Bhikaiji remained in exile in Europe until 1935. She became very ill and appealed to the British Government to allow her to return home. She was granted permission and she returned to India after 30-plus years. Though Bhikaiji returned to India, sadly she did not live long enough to see India gain independence. Nor did she witness the hoisting of another tricolour flag similar to the one she had raised fearlessly decades earlier. The Mother of the Indian Revolution!

Honours & Awards: In 1962, India Post issued a commemorative 15 paise stamp in Bhikaiji Cama's honour. In 1997, the Indian Coast Guard commissioned a Priyadarshini-class fast patrol vessel named the *ICGS Bhikaiji Cama*.



Rukmini Lakshmipathi

07. Rukmini Lakshmipathi

First Female Prisoner of Salt Satyagraha

Born on December 06, 1892

Once upon a time, a sensitive little girl was born in Madras (present-day Chennai) by the name of Rukmini. Later known as Rukmini Lakshmipathi, she was a political activist and the first female prisoner of the Salt Satyagraha Movement in 1930.

Rukmini was born into a progressive family that valued women's education and freedom. She completed her graduation as one of the first batch of students from Women's Christian College, Madras. Influenced by the freedom movement activities around her and inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, she soon joined the Indian National Congress.

Rukmini encouraged fellow women to join the freedom struggle and the Swadeshi movement. She also took to spinning and wearing khadi and encouraged other women to do the same. A staunch believer in women's empowerment, she was a member of the Women's Indian Association that worked to promote women's education, the abolition of child marriages and other social reforms and legislations in the 19th century.

Recognising Rukmini's work on women's empowerment, the Indian National Congress deputed her to attend the International Women's Conference on Suffrage in Paris in 1926. Her participation in the Simon Commission protests and the hoisting of the Indian flag to mark a hypothetical Independence Day in Madras brought her to the forefront of the fight for freedom.

In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi launched the nationwide Salt Satyagraha protests opposing the salt taxes imposed by the British Government. Protest marches were organised in coastal areas around the country. Rukmini was among the protestors from the Madras Presidency who marched from Trichy to Vedaranyam. She was arrested and imprisoned, becoming the first female prisoner of the Salt Satyagraha Movement. Later, she was also one of the brave protestors of the individual Satyagraha Movement.

In 1937, Rukmini was elected as the first woman member and Deputy Speaker of the Madras Legislative Assembly. In 1946, when elections were held for the Madras Legislature, Rukmini contested and won again. She became the Minister for Public Health and worked towards popularising Ayurveda and Indian systems of medicine.

Contributing to and leading multiple political and social activities, Rukmini influenced fellow women then and continues to be an inspiration. Womanpower!

Honours & Awards: In 1997, India Post issued a Rs 2.00 postage stamp in Rukmini Lakshmipathi's honour.

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