

# JOURNAL GLOBAL VALUES

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### **Revolt of Rani Chennamma of Kittur against The British**

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#### **Abstract:**

*Among the rulers who fought against the British in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Rani Chennamma is well remembered. She was successfully the suppressed the invasion of British to Kittur and defeated the British by killing Thackery. Her rule in Kittur is also well appreciated with regard to her popularity. Rani Chennamma is encouragement and role model for the present women to fight against the convention based social evils associated with women.*

#### **Introduction:**

British were occupied India including Karnataka for more than two centuries. Bondage whether social, economic or political has always evoked intense resistance the world over. The history of foreign domination in India is replete with acts of courage, sacrifice and dedication to the cause of freedom. When East Indian Company took all the parts of Karnataka before 1850s, the different provinces ruled by different local rulers were opposed to the British invasive policy. As such, there were revolutions against the British by Tatyatope, Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, Mangal Pandey, etc at different parts of India. To reject the British bondage, there were also many rulers in Karnataka (former Mysore State). Notable among them include Tippu Sultan, Dhondia Waugh, Rani Chennamma of Kittur, Sangolli Rayanna and such others were declared revolt against the British, but due to different reasons, they revolts were suppressed by the British. Rani Chennamma was the brave queen of Kittur, Belgaum district, who fought against British in 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Rani Channamma of Kittur was the first women Indian warrior to take up arms against the British, forestalling Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi by a generation. The heroic deeds of the dauntless Rani Channamma and the patriotic sons of Kittur are cherished with great pride and affection by Kannadigas and form a glorious chapter in the history of the Freedom Movement in India<sup>1</sup>.

**Rani Chennamma of Kittur:**

Belgaum District occupies an important place in the freedom struggle of India. Rani Kittur Chennamma was the First Woman in the country to raise a formidable revolt against the British. Rani Chennamma was the daughter of a family of Kakati Desais. She was a brave fighter. Her father was Dholappa Gouda Desai and mother Padmavati. Chennamma was married Mallasarja Desai, Kittur King, at the age of 22. Rani Rudramma was first wife of Mallasarja and Chennamma was the second wife of Mallasarja.

Chennamma was deeply interested in statecraft. She could not harbour in justice and cruelty. It was this quality which endeared her to her husband and the people. She began to aid her husband in the administration of the state which was being pulled in a tug of war between the contending might of the Marathas and the British.

As per the suggestion of Chennamma, Rani Rudramma's son Shivalingarudra Sarja was succeeded Malasarja Desai. Unfortunately, he was died due to ill health and adopted a son, Shivalingappa and named "Sawai Mallasarja" to look after the Desgati. British Governor General's Doctrine of Lapse was violated in this regard.

Due to ineffectiveness of Shivalinga Sarja Desai, his step mother Rani Chennamma was looking after the administration of Kittur. In 1818, the British attacked the Belgaum fort which was under the Peshwas and during the seizure which lasted from 21<sup>st</sup> March to 12<sup>th</sup> April 1818. The Kittur Desai Shivalingarudra Sarja helped the British with men and material. By 12<sup>th</sup> April the Peshwas were completely routed and the Peshwa territory South of Belgaum, including Kittur came under British rule. Soon there after Shivalingarudra Sarja was sent by Thomas Munro, Commissioner of Dharwar and he was made to enter into an agreement on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1818 under which Kittur could retain its territories on condition of payment of the yearly tribute of Rs. 1,75,000/- to the British. However, under the agreement, he was asked to hand over Khanapur taluka to the British to enable them to keep their army and maintain it from that income. They however assured them that the Kittur rulers would be treated honorably and there would be no interference in the internal administration of the State as long as they did not do anything which could harm the interests of the British.

The Munro made an agreement with Kittur province and highlights of the agreement were:

1. The British consented to allow possession of all lands held by the Desai of Kittur first made under the Bijapur Sultans and later under the Peshwas.
2. The British agreed to continue all the privileges, titles and other marks of royalty which were enjoyed by the Desai from the beginning.

3. On account of the recognition of the continuous and close friendship and co-operation between the British and the Kittur Chief, the British payed the Desai on a different and higher footing than even the Patawardhans, not to speak of all other Jageerdars. Though the Desai was a tributary prince, he enjoyed a special status and political privileges. This can be seen from Elphinstone's letter to the Governor General dated 18<sup>th</sup> June 1818.
4. The obligation of maintaining 473 horsemen and 1000 infantry and of rendering service when called upon by the Peshwa was removed, and thus the autonomous character of the State was recognized<sup>2</sup>.

However, the condition of surrender of Khanapur to the British was a humiliating one. It also deprived the State of its strategic advantage and a substantial part of its income. Rani Chennamma was unhappy with this agreement, but felt helpless. The British, in turn, were watching the developments in Kittur and waiting for a suitable opportunity to interfere in its affairs. Rani Channamma's restraint and clever strategy precluded any such possibility. As days passed, Rani Channamma assumed more and more control over the affairs of the State and she was virtually its ruler<sup>3</sup>.

In 1822, Thackeray, the Principal Collector of Dharwar wrote a letter to the ruler of Kittur alleging that the State was giving shelter to thugs and robbers and that, therefore, the tranquility and peace in the area was disturbed<sup>4</sup>. He threatened to take serious note of these and that the consequences would be grave. These allegations were baseless and flimsy and it was evident that the British only wanted some pretext to grab Kittur.

Due to his ill health, Shivalingappa Sarja was adopted Shivalingappa on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1824 and the adoption ceremony of Shivalingappa alias Sawai Mallasarja was made in Kittur. Shivalingarudra Sarja survived for about twelve hours after the event. He died in the early hours of the next morning i.e., at 4 a.m. on Sunday, the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1824<sup>5</sup>. This was violation of Doctrine of Lapse of Lord Dalhousie. In this regard, on 21<sup>st</sup> October 1824, Thackery invited Rani Chennamma to make arrangements for the safety of the treasure at Kittur.

Rani Channamma had refused to meet Thackeray on the 21<sup>st</sup> October of 1824 under the pretext of indisposition, and began to make all preparations to teach Thackeray a lesson and show what sort of people Kittur had. Thackery was become alert and reached Kittur fort with his British army. Thackeray had received information that nearly 2,000 men army had assembled inside the fort, while some more were coming into the fort every minute. He ordered his fighting forces consisting of horse artillery and cavalry to proceed towards the fort gates. He then sent a messenger to Sardar Gurusiddappa, Commandar-in-Chief of the Kittur Army, with a stern warning that the gates be opened forthwith. Sardar Gursiddappa replied that unless all the British troops were moved back to a safe distance, the gates would not be opened. Thackeray, then sent a final warning through

a messenger that if the gates were not opened in a "Ghuree" (24 minutes), they would be blown open by the guns<sup>6</sup>.

Thackeray posted two of the commandants of his fighting forces, Capt. Black and Lt. Deighton, on either side of the gate. The artillery and the cavalry under the command of Lt. Sewell were made to stand a few yards away from the gateway in readiness to attack the fort. These were tense moments as the British soldiers stood watching to see whether the gates would be opened or not. After the expiry of 24 minutes, the gates of the fort were burst open from inside and Rani Channamma's gallant horsemen thundered out at lightning speed and attacked the British garrison<sup>7</sup>.

The Kittur forces attacked from two sides, one from the gateway and the other from the ramparts of the fort. Sardar Gurusiddappa commanded the forces that attacked from the gates, while Rani Channamma, standing on the ramparts, directed the military operations from above. Stretching herself erect, as she sat on her agile horse, with a golden belt around her waist from which hung her scabbard and holding a drawn sword in her right hand, her left hand holding the reins of her horse, she looked like a very picture embodiment of courage and determination. Her soldiers made a quick sally and put every enemy soldier to the sword. They seized the guns from Capt. Black and Lt. Deighton who were about to fire them. Their heads were chopped off by the infuriated soldiers and their bodies cut to pieces. Channamma's army then made an attack on the horse artillery and troops. The British army reeled under this fierce onslaught<sup>8</sup>.

The Kittur Soldiers rushed into the British garrison and massacred as many as they could. And on the summit of the fortress was Rani Channamma on horse, directing the movements of her army. On her side was her devoted bodyguard, Sadhunavar Balappa of Amtur. She was surrounded by four soldiers on horseback carrying guns and swords to shield her all the time from possible attacks on her person. The attack by the Kittur army was so sudden that the British soldiers had no time to recover. Many of them had been hacked to death by Channamma's forces. Confused and demoralised, they fled. There was panic everywhere. Thackeray, seeing his panic-stricken soldiers, jumped on to his horse and galloped towards the fort. Sadhunavar Balappa, a warrior of reknown, saw Thackeray making for the summit where he stood with Rani Channamma. Aiming his gun at Thackeray, he fired. He was an excellent marksman. The bullet hit the Englishman in the chest and toppled him from his horse. A group of soldiers rushed towards him and hacked his body to pieces<sup>9</sup>. In this way, British army was defeated and ran away. The British were humiliated by defeat in Kittur battle and British officers were angry and planned for another attack on Kittur.

Consequently, Chaplin demanded the surrender of all the army within the fort. Channamma was never afraid of the British at any time. But on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1824, something dreadful, unimaginable had happened. The traitors had tampered with the power magazine and the gunpowder was made useless. The ammunition was nearly over. Channamma came to know about this fact. The cruel treachery of some people, with no gunpowder, she became helpless. Meanwhile,

the British came to know that their sinister plot was successful for it was the British who managed to sabotage the power-magazine. So, in the early hours of the morning of 3<sup>rd</sup> December, the British attacked the fort. In this battle, much blood was split on both the sides. It was a bitter fight between two forces - one determined to conquer a free and independent people, the other to resist until death.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1824, the British with their superior force and weapons defeated Kittur army. On 5<sup>th</sup> December 1824, a sad day for Kittur as Chennamma tried to escape from the eastern gate to fight another day. But she was prevented by the guards. Gurusiddappa, the hero in the battle and Sangolli Rayanna and 20 others were immediately arrested at the point of the bayonet. The British prisoners were set free and the fort was surrendered. Chennamma, Veerawwa and Jankibai, the three widows were detained. Gurusiddappa and 20 others were taken away to Belgaum where they were lodged in Belgaum fort until they were all hanged<sup>10</sup>.

On 12<sup>th</sup> December 1824, finally the dream of Thackeray was realized. On that fateful day, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1824, Chaplin raised the Union Jack on Gadadimardi, the watchtower, and the Kittur flag still fluttering was lowered. Soon after the ladies in the palace were asked to leave the fort on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1824. The whole family, Chennamma, Veerawwa and Jankibai were taken to Bailhongal fort. There they were kept as political prisoners<sup>11</sup>.

Although a prisoner of the British, Chennamma was still a revolutionary. She never lost the shining faith still radiant within her bosom. And all the time in the fort she was planning and scheming. Chennamma tried twice to escape from the fort to wage a battle a new against the enemy. She was suspected and a strict watch was kept on her movements. Her last days in the fort were spent in meditative solitude. At last on Saturday evening, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1829, as the sun was sinking below the hills far away from the Fort, Chennamma Rani died a natural death.

### **Concluding Remarks:**

Rani Chennamma symbolized bravery and courageous woman. Today also Kittur has become popular as the remains of the fortress of Kittur tells story of Rani Chennamma's ambition and quest for freedom from the British. Today, women in India are also not free in terms of conventional traditions, social subjugation and violence. The present women must learn from the historic women, who have struggled both against social traditions, which subjugated women as well as external forces like the British.

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