

The Virangana in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture

Author(s): Kathryn Hansen

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# The Virangana in North Indian History

## Myth and Popular Culture

Kathryn Hansen

*The pattern of women's lives and their orientation to social reality are significantly shaped by the models of womanly conduct set out in stories, legends and songs preserved from the past. The epic heroine type—the sacrificing, chaste loyal wife—is viewed as representing the ideal for female behaviour at least among the high Hindu castes. Hindu mythology also offers another female paradigm—the all-powerful mother goddess. Between these polarities lies an overlooked and yet important alternative paradigm of Indian womanhood: the virangana, the woman who manifests the qualities of virya or heroism.*

IN India as in other societies, historical and mythological accounts of heroic behaviour frame paradigms which assist individuals and groups in defining their identities, inculcating values to the young, and judging the actions of others. Women as well as men are powerfully influenced by the exemplars of their culture. The patterns of women's lives, their expectations and ideals, their orientation to social reality, are significantly shaped by the models of womanly conduct set out in stories, legends, and songs preserved from the past. Even the contemporary images of women promulgated in the mass media—cinema, advertising, popular music—owe much to the prototypes of womanhood inherited from older sources. Moreover, in countries like India, these sources are sanctified by their great age and prestige. Literary masterpieces such as the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* among other repositories of ancient lore, continue to provide lessons to today's women and men, with an authority that even the technologically sophisticated current generation accepts.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of these culturally-embedded images and their ideological dominance in women's lives has been an issue for women's activists in both India and the west. Madhu Kishwar, one of the pioneers of feminist journalism in India in the 70s and 80s, expresses dismay at "the pervasive popular cultural ideal of womanhood" conveyed through mythic role-models:

It is woman as a selfless giver, someone who gives and gives endlessly, gracefully, smilingly, whatever the demand, however unreasonable and harmful to herself... Sita, Savitri, Anusuya and various other mythological heroines are used as the archetypes of such a woman and women themselves are deeply influenced by this cultural ideal.<sup>2</sup>

Kishwar, while acknowledging the tenacity of such mythological antecedents, urges that indigenous cultural traditions be reinterpreted and appropriated by the women's movement rather than be rejected from a western modernist standpoint. Thus she asserts, "Our cultural traditions have tremendous potential within them to combat reactionary and anti-women ideas, if we can identify their points of strength and use them creatively."<sup>3</sup>

In the west, feminists such as Andrea

Dworkin have analysed the attitudes towards women contained in the common fairy tale heroines Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella, all of whom, she declares, "are characterised by passivity, beauty, innocence, and victimisation."<sup>4</sup> These heroines figure largely in the reproduction of a culture which diminishes women, from generation to generation.

In the persons of the fairy tale—the wicked witch, the beautiful princess, the heroic prince—we find what the culture would have us know about who we are.

The point is that we have not formed that ancient world—it has formed us. We ingested it as children whole, had its values and consciousness imprinted on our minds as cultural absolutes long before we were in fact men and women. We have taken the fairy tales of childhood with us into maturity, chewed but still lying in the stomach, as real identity.<sup>5</sup>

For Dworkin, the woman-hating stance displayed in the fairy tale leads directly to the exploitation of women found in literary and cinematic pornography. In response to this type of analysis, some feminists have begun to rewrite the traditional European fairy tale corpus with the non-sexist education of children in mind. Suniti Namjoshi's *Feminist Fables* provides a parallel example of an adult-oriented reworking of tales from various traditions.

The mythic female figures most often identified in India are the well known heroines Sita, Savitri, Anusuya, and others. The classical epics are the texts which provide authoritative references for them, but the stories are actually transmitted to most people through vernacular retellings; folk versions in traditional genres of song, dance or drama, or in the urban areas, comics, picture books, cassettes, records. For villagers, the 'texts' are usually performances of theatre, music, and dance which recreate the stories in a ritually-charged atmosphere. Recently scholars have begun to examine more closely the contexts which elucidate the significance of the text to the participants, and there is a new appreciation of the wide range of meanings which an epic character or story may acquire within varying social and performative circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

The epic heroine type—the sacrificing, chaste, loyal wife—is viewed as representing the ideal for female behaviour at least

among the high Hindu castes. The ideal may be far from the reality as experienced by many women.<sup>7</sup> However, the prescriptive force of the epic heroines is such that few can escape their example. The story of Savitri, for instance, teaches unwavering devotion to the husband, which, if faithfully practised, can endow the wife with supernatural capacities, even the power to bring back the dead. Passive endurance in adversity is the lesson imparted by Sita, heroine of the *Ramayana* who follows Rama into forest exile. Willingness to suffer even self-immolation for the preservation of the husband's honour is enjoined by the examples of Sita's fire ordeal as well as the self-sacrifice of Sati, wife of Siva. In each case, the self-abnegation and subservience to the husband are seen to bestow power upon the wife. This power may be used for various ends, but customarily it is directed toward the welfare, long life, and good name of the husband and the couple's offspring, particularly the sons. The epic stories do not portray women as powerless, but define their power as derived from self-effacement in a relationship of subjugation to the male.

Hindu mythology offers another important female paradigm which contrasts with the wifely ideal, namely, the mother goddess. The goddess, whether manifest in her benign aspect as Lakshmi or Parvati, or in her more menacing form as Kali or Durga, derives her power fundamentally from her relationship as mother rather than as spouse, a role in which she exercises distinctive female control through the ability to generate and nurture life. Outside of folk religion, however, her power is often subverted or leashed by subordination to a male deity. Thus each god is matched with a consort who is understood as his activating energy or *shakti*. Philosophically, the individual goddess-consorts may be subsumed under one universal energy-principle or *shakti*, of which they are considered manifestations.

The Hindu recognition of an underlying female principle has impressed some observers as a more positive formulation of woman's place in the cosmos than that offered by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Joanna Little and Rama Joshi go further to connect goddess worship with a strong self-image of women and a matriarchal worldview in India:

The worship of the mother goddess does not constitute a matriarchy, but it does constitute a matriarchal *culture*, in the sense that it preserves the value of women as life-givers and sources of activating energy, and it represents the acknowledgement of women's power by women and men in the culture.<sup>8</sup> They maintain that the goddess empowers women to act in a strong and assertive manner.<sup>9</sup>

The feminist movement in the west has sparked a renewed interest in goddess figures from various cultures, together with an agenda of reconstructing women's spirituality to free it from the patriarchal premises of the major world religions. It is not surprising to find a reevaluation of the Hindu goddess also underway among feminists in India. The use of goddess imagery to identify women's concerns is taking place, as in the title and logo of the publishing collective, 'Kali for Women'. The word *shakti* has been incorporated into the Indian women's movement, rich as its ambiguity is, implying 'power' or 'energy' and also referring to the Great Goddess.

The question remains, to what extent have the traditional forms of goddess worship affected the society's attitudes toward women? Does the goddess serve to enhance women's status? Were goddess cults connected in their evolution to women's experience or self-perception? Does the goddess function as a model for emulation? These are large questions which cannot properly be addressed in this essay. However a heuristic distinction may be tentatively proposed between the mother goddess, a powerful transcendent figure accessed through propitiation, and the epic wife-heroine, a gender-specific role model available for imitation. In Sandra Robinson's terms, the Hindu goddess's function may be viewed as primarily *revelatory*, in contrast to the role played by the epic heroines as *exemplary* women.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE VIRANGANA AS ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM

Between the polarities of self-effacing wife and all-powerful mother lies an overlooked and yet important alternative paradigm of Indian womanhood: the *virangana*, the woman who manifests the qualities of *virya* or heroism. The *virangana* seems to be a paradox within the normative categories for gender in high-caste north Indian society. She is a valiant fighter who distinguishes herself by prowess in warfare, an activity normally reserved for men. She demonstrates her martial skills and courage by direct participation in combat, at the risk of her life: in fact, sometimes she dies in battle or takes her own life on the battlefield to avoid ignominious defeat. She is a leader of women and men, acting as head of state during peace and general in time of war. She adopts male attire, as well as the symbols of male status and authority, especially the sword and she rides a horse. The *virangana* is dedicated to virtue, wisdom, and the

defence of her people. Above all, she is a fighter and a victor in the struggle with the forces of evil.

The evidence for the *virangana* is derived first of all from the historical record, which documents the existence of outstanding queens in various regions of India since ancient times. Folklore and mythology provide many other examples of women of this type, especially the non-elite forms: local legends, folk theatre, popular song. The twentieth century descendants of the *virangana* are represented in the valiant women of the popular cinema and in the 'bandit queen'. These heroines are also the topics of comic books, children's literature, and school texts. The *virangana* ideal has been adopted by political and social reform movements and the prototype has undergone change with historical and cultural developments. The abundance of examples suggests that the *virangana*, while not the dominant norm for the high castes of north India, has had a continuous presence for many centuries as an alternative female paradigm. It is a unique vision of womanhood, combining direct assumption of power with exemplary virtue.

Examples of the *virangana* exist in many parts of India and one suspects that the type, if not the nomenclature, is not restricted to the south Asian sub-continent. The warrior-woman was undoubtedly a more common phenomenon in the tribal cultures situated on the periphery of the central Indian cultural zone, particularly in the matrilineal cultures some of which existed before the advent of the Indo-Aryans and still flourish in the mountainous areas. However, this article will confine itself to examining the *virangana* in north India, primarily in the Indo-Gangetic plain, although this means neglecting famous figures such as Rani Chennamma of Karnataka. For the sake of economy, omitted also is the ancient period of Indian history; the focus is on the medieval and modern periods, beginning with the arrival of the Muslims around 1000 AD. Hence the picture to be sketched may be magnified to fit the broader canvas of south Asia, yet in itself it tells much about the counter-culture of womanhood that existed and still exists in the heartland of Sita and Savitri.

#### WARRIORS AND QUEENS

The number of women who played prominent roles in the political history of north India is probably larger than is ordinarily acknowledged, especially if the influence of wives, mothers, and sisters upon ruling males is included. Our object here is not to rewrite the history of these women but rather to consider the most visible women in power, those who became rulers of kingdoms and/or defended them. These exceptional figures have retained a strong grip on the Indian imagination, and have been celebrated in stories, legends, poems, and songs down through the ages. What follows is only a brief outline of some of the most famous *viranganas* of north Indian history. No at-

tempt has been made to delve into primary historical documents and resolve the controversies regarding the events that took place during their reigns. The synopses given here are derived from secondary materials such as Madhavananda and Majumdar's *Great Women of India* (1953) and also from the popular accounts found in *Amar Chitra Katha* comics, children's books in Hindi, and folklore sources as noted. This then is a popular history of India's queens, as remembered by the people.

Razia Sultana was the first and only woman of the Sultanate (or any later period) to ascend the throne at Delhi. She was the daughter of Iltutmish, the powerful ruler of the Slave dynasty. Her father had a special fondness for her as a child, and trained her himself in politics and affairs of state. She was well-versed in the *Quran*, knew several other sciences, and demonstrated her martial courage in various campaigns early in life. She was chosen over her brothers to take charge of the administration for several years while Iltutmish conducted military excursions to the south. Her father then designated her heir-apparent on the basis of her competence and experience and following his death, she established herself on the throne even though her mother supported the claims of her brother Ruknuddin Firoz.

Razia's accession raised questions about the right of females to enjoy sovereign power, a practice known to the Turks and Persians but new to India. For some time Razia was able to neutralise the factions which challenged her authority. She appeared daily on the imperial throne in male attire. According to Sir H Elliot, "She discarded her female apparel and veil, wore a tunic and cap like a man, gave public audience, and rode on an elephant without any attempt at concealment."<sup>11</sup> She was involved in several battles against rebellious Turkish nobles and was finally captured and put to death while a prisoner. In all, she was the sovereign ruler for four years (1236-1240).

Many of the characteristics of Razia's career are found in the later *viranganas* known to history: her early tutelage by her father; her education in both the arts of war and the skills of reading, writing, and administration; her rise to power at the death of a male kinsman; her reputation as a wise, just and generous ruler; her assumption of male costume and perquisites of royal office; her military leadership and valour in defending her kingdom against enemies; her death in battle. But while Razia was named heir-apparent by her father, it was more common for royal women to ascend the throne while serving as regents for their underage sons. Queen-regents ruled among the Rajputs, Muslims, Marathas, and Gonds, as we shall soon see.

What is significant about the queen-regent is the rejection of the practice of *sati*, ritual suicide, implied in this role. These queens chose not to immolate themselves upon their husbands' deaths, defying the code of female

virtue through self-sacrifice. Instead they assumed power and ruled in place of male offspring until the age of majority (and sometimes beyond). Several stories of such queens emphasise the decision to forego *sati*, with its promise of earthly prestige and spiritual liberation, for the greater obligation of serving one's family and one's people in the face of hostile threats.

Once in office, such queens did not stint in the defence of their kingdoms. When Samar Singh of Chitor was vanquished in the second battle of Tarain against Muizuddin Muhammad in 1192, his queen Kurma Devi stood in for the minor heir, Karan. Possessed of military valour and skill in administration, she "nobly maintained what his father left. She headed the Rajputs and gave battle in person to Kutubuddin, near Amber, when the viceroy was defeated and wounded."<sup>12</sup>

A similar story is that of Rani Durgavati, a favourite judging from the amount of detail included in the various sources. Rani Durgavati, ruled among the Gonds of what is now Madhya Pradesh at the time of the emperor Akbar. The sources differ as to her origins, but several say that she was the daughter of the Chandella Rajput chief of Mahoba. Father and daughter were fond of riding and hunting together. Her marriage to Dalpat Shah, the king of Gondwana, represented an unconventional alliance, and this element has been used to construct a modern-day image of her as a high-minded, forward-thinking reformer, struggling with the society's prejudices and the opposition of a caste-conscious father. Soon after she gave birth to a son, Bir Narayan, her husband died and she became regent.<sup>13</sup> Early on, she had to face several attacks on her kingdom, and she successfully repulsed the incursions of Baz Bahadur of Malwa. The legends about her skill in tiger-hunting appear to have their origin in Abul Fazl's account. "She was a good shot with gun and arrow, and continually went a-hunting and shot animals of the chase with her gun. It was her custom that whenever she heard that a tiger had made his appearance she did not drink water till she had shot him."<sup>14</sup> She was also known for her wise counsel and munificence, and while she ruled there were no rebellions in her kingdom.

Durgavati's challenge came with the advance of Akbar's imperial army under the leadership of Asaf Khan. Cloaked in armour, mounted on an elephant, "with her bow and quiver lying by her side and with a burnished lance in her hand, the Rani herself led the troops," even in opposition to the advice of her officers.<sup>15</sup> She inflicted two defeats on the Mughal invaders, but in the third contest her badly outnumbered forces became demoralised when her son was wounded, and they deserted the field. At this point, Durgavati continued the fight on her elephant, sustaining a series of wounds, and she finally stabbed herself when capture seemed imminent. Thus ended

her fifteen or sixteen years of regency, and according to the *Central Provinces Gazetteer*, her death in 1564 was "as noble and devoted as her life had been useful."<sup>16</sup>

While Abul Fazl celebrated the virtues of Durgavati in the *Akbarnamah* another queen-regent of the same period, Chand Bibi of Ahmadnagar, also resisted the Mughal advance and was lauded by generations of historians as well as luminaries like Annie Besant. As she reigned in the Deccan, outside the geographical focus of this essay, we will only recapitulate a few points which link her with the other *viranganas*. Daughter of Husain Nizam Shah and sister of Burhanul-mulk, she was well-trained in Arabic and Persian and spoke several Deccani languages. She participated equally with her husband Ali Adil Shah in both military and administrative affairs while he was alive, and when he died, she succeeded to the throne of Bijapur and became regent for his nephew. One famous anecdote relates to the siege of the Ahmadnagar fort by the Mughals shortly before her death in 1599:

Once, when a portion of the rampart was blown away by mines laid by the besiegers, she rushed out of her palace barefooted with a number of trusted followers, a veil on her face and a naked sword in her hand, and rallying her men succeeded in repairing the damaged wall overnight.<sup>17</sup>

In honour of her bravery, the Mughal prince Murad bestowed on her the title Chand Sultana, and withdrew his troops. Like Razia Sultana, she fell victim in the end to dissensions among her own nobles.

The story of Tarabai, wife of Prithviraj, as recounted in Colonel Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, offers an example of the valour achieved by certain Rajput queens in the sixteenth century. Tarabai was the daughter of a deposed chief, Rai Suratan, whose lifelong ambition was to regain his kingdom at Thoda. Trained by her father in sports and the use of the bow and spear, at fourteen, "scorning the habiliments and occupations of her sex, she dressed pretty much like her father's cavaliers, learned to guide the war-horse, and to throw with unerring aim the arrow from its back even while at full speed."<sup>18</sup> Tarabai and her father made an attempt to recapture Thoda from the Afghans but failed, and subsequently it was declared that whoever accomplished the deed would win her hand in marriage. Prithviraj's brother Jaimal proceeded to court her, but when he tried to dishonour her in the palace, he was killed by her father. Prithviraj then stepped in and declared his intention to become her husband. Riding with Tarabai at his side, the two with only one cavalryman infiltrated a Muslim procession in Thoda and struck down the Afghan chief: Prithviraj dealt a blow with his lance while Tarabai delivered the fatal wound with an arrow from her bow. She then killed an elephant single-handedly, enabling the couple to escape safely. "The exploit... won the hand of the fair Amazon, who, equipped

with bow and quiver, subsequently accompanied him in many perilous enterprises."<sup>19</sup> Tarabai did not rule in her own right, although she defended her kingdom on a number of occasions. When Prithviraj was later poisoned, she joined him on the funeral pyre as a *sati*.

The rule of Ahalyabai Holkar in Maharashtra in the eighteenth century lasted thirty years, and in this queen we find the virtues of just and efficient administration carried to the highest point. Married at the age of eight to Khanduji (or Khande Rao), son of Malhar Rao Holkar, Ahalyabai was trained for her future duties by her father-in-law rather than her father; "he coached her in the collection of revenue, writing of dispatches and in the management of the army. Many a time he also took her with him in his campaigns."<sup>20</sup> In addition to learning to ride, wield weapons, and exercise the arts of statecraft, she was educated in the Hindu scriptures and later showed great interest in religious texts. Before she was twenty, her husband was killed during an expedition on which Ahalyabai, Malhar Rao, and Khande Rao had embarked. Ahalya decided to become a *sati*, but Malhar Rao dissuaded her.<sup>21</sup> She began to assume more and more of the responsibilities of rulership. Malhar Rao's death soon followed, and Ahalyabai's son Male Rao was named head of the government, but he was mentally unstable and died shortly thereafter.

Ahalyabai thus took complete control of the administration in 1765 and ruled until her death in 1795, assisted by Tukoji Rao, and adopted son who was in charge of the army. During the early stage of her reign, she prevented an attack by Raghoba by organising a regiment of women, preparing her troops for combat, and displaying herself in command, "directing four bows, with quivers full of arrows, to be fitted to the corners of the howdah, or seat, on her favourite elephant."<sup>22</sup> She also quelled uprisings by the Chandravat Rajputs and the Bhils, personally leading her forces. After these initial challenges, her country enjoyed peace for a long period. "The undisturbed internal tranquillity of the country was even more remarkable than its exemption from foreign attack," wrote Sir John Malcolm in 1832.<sup>23</sup>

She sat every day in open court, transacting business and distributing justice, investigating even the smallest appeals in detail. Unlike the other *viranganas*, she is not commonly pictured in male dress, but instead wore simple widow's attire, plain white clothing without any jewellery except a small necklace. Ahalyabai's rule was marked by an increase in the prosperity of her people, moderate taxation, stability in the ministerial ranks, the construction of highways, forts, wells, and temples, acts of charity directed to the poor and brahmins, and a high level of piety in her personal life. Lauded by the British as "one of the purest and most exemplary rulers that ever existed", Ahalya found favour among both Muslims

and Hindus and is still revered in Maharashtra.<sup>24</sup>

The most famous *virangana* in north Indian history is also the closest to the present time. In Lakshmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi, is found the summation of the traits already discussed. Born in a Brahmin family from Nagpur, her father Moropant was a military adviser to the exiled Peshwa, and she grew up with Nana Sahib and Tantya Tope, her later allies, in the court at Bithur, learning military skills as well as reading and writing. When she was married to Gangadhar Rao, the ruler of Jhansi, she brought her father with her. To Gangadhar Rao, who had been issueless by a previous wife, she produced a son, but he survived only three months. Overcome by grief, Gangadhar Rao died soon after, although first he made sure to adopt a son as heir. Lakshmi Bai took over the affairs of state as regent, and began a series of negotiations with the British to have the adopted son recognised. However, Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse was put into effect and Jhansi was annexed by the British in 1857.

During the disturbances which spread over north India in 1857, troops in Jhansi revolted and killed a large number of British citizens. The Rani's responsibility for this massacre and her relations with the British early in her rule are controversial topics, but it is clear that subsequently she took active leadership in opposing the British suppression of the rebellion. When the British under Hugh Rose marched against her, she defended Jhansi fort and only fled to safety when the British overran the ramparts. She faced the British again in major battles at Kalpi and at Gwalior, where she died in combat.

While the historical details of Lakshmi Bai's rule are subjects of debate, in the popular Indian mind she is unequivocally identified as a great freedom fighter in the first stage of India's war of independence against the British. With this are linked a number of heroic images and anecdotes, which can now be seen as part of a larger *virangana* complex. Thus when she was a girl of seven or eight, she tamed an elephant by climbing up its trunk to its tusk.<sup>25</sup> After her marriage, she was stifled by court life and formed a regiment of women, with whom she could practice horseback riding, swordsmanship, pole climbing, and wrestling.<sup>26</sup> It is said that sometimes she fought her enemies with swords in both of her hands and the reins of her horse between her teeth.<sup>27</sup> She was also accomplished at shooting. Most paintings depict her mounted on horseback, carrying a shield in one hand with her sword raised high over her head. Frequently a male child is shown seated behind her or tied to her back in a satchel, a reference to the story of her flight from Jhansi when she "left the fort under cover of darkness on horseback with, as popular tradition has it, her adopted son on her back."<sup>28</sup> Legends abound regarding miraculous feats such as her extraordinary leaps, long and swift rides, and prowess with

the sword.

Lakshmi Bai's masculine appearance is frequently mentioned as part of her legend. Casting aside the constraints imposed on brahmin widows, she chose clothing which enabled her to ride and lead a vigorous life. In portraits she wears either a Maharashtrian sari draped between the legs, or trousers and a long tunic belted at the waist, with her sword stuck in the waistband. At the time of her death, according to Hugh Rose, she was wearing a red jacket, red trousers, and white turban. Among the many songs, poems, and novels dealing with her life, perhaps the best-known is Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem in Hindi which uses the refrain *khub lari mardani voh to Jhansi vali rani thi*, "bravely fought the *mardani* the Queen of Jhansi." Here *mardani* signifies a masculine woman, *mardana* being a Persian adjective meaning 'masculine, valorous', and 'i' the feminine ending in Hindi. John Lang, a British visitor who chanced to meet her in person, described her physique as that of a strong, intelligent, dignified individual. Far from being considered odd or inappropriate, the Rani's physical presence was extremely effective in mobilising her forces to action. Her very arrival on the battlefield is said to have inspired her troops with courage and hope.

While Lakshmi Bai's fame derives primarily from her qualities as a warrior, she was also an able administrator, known for her diligence and sense of justice. Like the queens already discussed, she acted not only for the protection of her people, but was also fond of learning, supported the development of the royal library, provided for the poor patronised musicians, and dispensed religious charity. Even her enemies praised her virtues: "The high descent of the Rani, her unbounded liberality to her troops and retainers, and her fortitude which no reverses could shake rendered her an influential and dangerous adversary," wrote Sir Hugh Rose.<sup>29</sup>

The evidence presented so far should be sufficient to indicate the historicity of the *virangana* among the major ruling groups of north India during the last millennium. Additional examples could be provided from Bengal, Assam, Kashmir, the South, and the tribal regions. Certain political and personal circumstances seem to foreshadow the emergence of these queens. Tutelage and support by a senior male prepared the women for high office, and absence or incompetence of adult male heirs often afforded an opportunity to take power. An external threat also appears to have served as a catalyst. Personal inclination and talent were no doubt significant if unchartable factors enabling women to become powerful queens and warriors.

Of equal importance to our study is the enduring place these warrior-women hold in the minds of the people. Their heroic deeds are celebrated in all the vehicles of communication known to the culture, from history books to comics, legends, films, and

songs. In these narrative traditions, the *virangana* is often likened to the goddess Durga or Kali, particularly during battle. Her iconography links her with the goddess visually, for she carries a sword, as Durga and Kali do (sometimes one in each of their many hands), and she rides on her 'vehicle', her horse corresponding to Durga's lion. Her defeat of threatening enemies is comparable to the warring goddesses' punishment of evil demons. This description of the goddess Durga fits the historical *virangana* well:

She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not fulfil household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function, fighting in battle. As an independent warrior who can hold her own against any male on the battlefield, she reverses the normal role for females and therefore stands outside normal society.<sup>30</sup>

The details of folk and popular accounts of historical warrior-queens may indeed be inspired by well known legends of the warring goddess.

And yet the *virangana* partakes almost equally of the character of the *sati*, the virtuous female who is truthful, just, and capable of self-sacrifice. Much is made in these stories of the queen's decision to forego ritual suicide, implying that greater virtue (*sat*) resides in serving the country. In several cases, the queens do eventually kill themselves when honour cannot be preserved by any other means. *Sat* or 'truth' in many popular tales of women signifies chastity (also commonly referred to a *pativrata*dharm, see section on folk drama below). However, in the *virangana* accounts, *sat* is construed somewhat differently. The notable fact is that little or no emphasis is placed on the sexual fidelity of the *virangana* or her status as 'wife' or 'widow'. Here virtue exists without being reduced to the physical purity of the female body, in fact, history preserves the names of several of the warrior-queens' lovers and companions. The *virangana's* status is not defined by her relationship to a man (as wife, mother or paramour), but by her valorous deeds, and therefore, sexual relations cannot impugn her 'truth'. The startling conjunction of physical prowess, moral strength, and sexual freedom with womanhood in the *virangana* indicates how extraordinary and positively powerful a figure she truly is.

We turn now to the perspective of modern political movements and consider how they have altered and adapted the ideal of the *virangana*.

#### THE *VIRANGANA* AS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SYMBOL

The historical *virangana* as remembered and valued today has been shaped by the emerging political and social ideologies of the last century. Reform movements like the Arya Samaj, the nationalist movement in its many phases, and more radical political and social programmes have addressed the status of women, and in so doing have claimed the

*virangana* as a potent symbol, both to combat colonial domination and to overturn oppressive attitudes toward women within the society. In the arguments made to justify their empire, the British asserted their moral superiority by citing Indian practices like *parda*, *sati* and *kulinism* which constituted 'proof' of the inferior and inhuman treatment of women and the depravity of men. A discourse was thus generated in which "Indian reformers were keen to show that, whatever the current position, women's status had been high in ancient India and many outstanding women had made their mark on Indian history."<sup>31</sup> The *virangana* ideal would not have been embraced had it only served as a refutation of British allegations, however. Much more was conveyed in this heroic model: the *virangana* was an inspiration to all freedom fighters, men as well as women. Indeed the *virangana* by extension became an emblem of the nation itself (Mother India) engaged in righteous struggle. The images and stories of women-warriors thus acquired a wide range of meanings, a richness of implication that enabled them to serve them many new uses.

One dimension of this process occurred in the field of education. Lala Devraj, the Arya Samaj leader who pioneered women's higher education in the Punjab, created a new curriculum for women which included a model of Indian womanhood conforming to the *virangana* type. While writing text books, he emphasised courageous European women's lives and created Indian heroines, such as Suvrita and the near-mythic Suri Suvira who manifested the heroic virtues. In his women's college, a game called Suvira was played "about a warrior girl who is not only brave in defence of her rights but can also wield modern weapons".<sup>32</sup> Other fictional materials used dealt with themes like 'Ek Rat', which describes a brave young girl who fights single handedly with four burglars while her brother is terrified. Through these role models, educationists presented girls with the possibility of new career alternatives, including the option of "becoming not only the pride but also the saviours of the nation."<sup>33</sup>

The reinforcement of a strong, positive female identity through the invocation of historically prominent women continues in practices such as naming hostels after famous queens, philosophers, and poets.<sup>34</sup> As women's higher education continues to be segregated from that of men in many instances in south Asia, the possibilities for preserving women's history and lore would appear to be greater than in the western education system, where male-centred interpretations of history and culture have dominated for centuries and are only slowly being challenged by feminist scholars.

In the political ideologies which arose in pre-independence India, it can generally be said that while women's issues were rarely neglected, the more conservative view favoured a passive, self sacrificing posture

for womanhood, while the more radical position embraced the activist *virangana* ideal. Mahatma Gandhi, committed as he was to non-violence and passive resistance, saw the epic heroines Sita and Savitri as the ideal embodiments of his political strategy. He believed women were by nature non-violent, and, therefore, they could and should play a major role in the nationalist movement. Gandhi emulated the virtue of taking suffering upon oneself, as a purificatory path to spiritual power, and insofar as women were "the embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge," they were the most effective and reliable force for his non-cooperation campaigns.<sup>35</sup> Thus even as he brought women out of seclusion and into the streets, Gandhi together with Sarojini Naidu and other followers redefined the passive heroism of the traditional woman in positive terms, in contrast to the bolder models of female achievement and bravery filling the new classrooms.<sup>36</sup>

Perhaps, as some have suggested, Gandhi's Sita was not so passive after all.<sup>37</sup> There is no doubt, however, that his concept of *ahimsa* was in opposition to the *virangana's* direct appropriation of force in defence of honour and justice. Jawaharlal Nehru's attitude toward Sita and Savitri as role models was more suspicious. In a speech in 1928 he said, "We hear a good deal about Sita and Savitri. They are revered names in India and rightly so, but I have a feeling that these echoes from the past are raised chiefly to hide our present deficiencies and to prevent us from attacking the root cause of women's degradation in India today."<sup>38</sup> That root cause was economic bondage, which could be alleviated only when women went to work outside the home and became economically independent.

The symbolism of the *virangana* was most eagerly seized upon by the proponents of revolutionary nationalism, heirs of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who favoured the use of force in defeating the British. For this group and their many sympathisers, the Rani of Jhansi became a byword for resistance to the British, and was the subject of many clandestine literary works.<sup>39</sup> In 1911 during Ramlila celebrations in UP, pictures of the Rani appeared together with Aurobindo Ghosh, Tilak, and Lala Lajpat Rai, establishing the association that the British wished so vigilantly to suppress. During World War II, when Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose reconstituted his Indian National Army in southeast Asia, he created a women's regiment and named it after the Rani of Jhansi. Over fifteen hundred women joined under the command of Lakshmi Swaminathan.<sup>40</sup> The *virangana's* exemplary valour seemed to be coupled here with a notion of female solidarity that has become more common of late. Feminist groups are now claiming the Rani of Jhansi, while at the same time, the Congress(I) has reportedly depicted Indira Gandhi in a film as a reincarnation of the

Rani, dressed like her with sword and shield.<sup>41</sup>

#### VIRANGANAS IN HINDI FOLK DRAMA

Complementing and overlapping the historical *virangana* is the *virangana* of folklore and legend. The sources analysed in this section all belong to the folk theatre genre known as Nautanki, or in earlier parlance, Swang, Sang, or Sangit. Nautanki texts have been printed by popular publishers in the Hindi-speaking region since the mid-1800s, and they provide an unparalleled resource for analysing the culture of the ordinary people. These texts (or more accurately, libretti) form the basis of entertainment-oriented performances, played by itinerant troupes at fairs, festivals, or weddings. Textual portions are sung to fixed musical patterns, accompanied by the loud *naggarā* (kettledrums) and a melodic instrument such as harmonium, *shehanai*, *sarangi*, or flute. Performances may also include clowning sequences, erotic dancing, acrobatics, or topical skits. Stories are drawn from Hindu and Islamic romances, local legends, tales of saints, even newspaper accounts and, recently, film plots.

In the nineteenth century, women did not appear on the Nautanki stage, and female roles were enacted by men, but beginning in the 1920s and 30s, women began to sing and play parts, and in the latest phase of development, they own and operate some of the major Nautanki companies. The position of women in this theatre is made more complex by the negative moral associations of Nautanki-viewing for the high castes. Women have often been prevented from attending Nautanki shows, which have evolved in such a way as to cater to male interest in sexual display and innuendo. Nonetheless the traditional stories of Nautanki often show women in strong, warlike stances. This section will demonstrate the operation of the *virangana* ideal among female protagonists in the Nautanki folk theatre.

One of the earliest stories in the Nautanki repertoire is *Syahposh*, or, as it was called in the nineteenth century, *Saudagar o Syahposh*. This is the tale of a merchant's son, Gabru (the *saudagar*), who attempts to win the hand of Jamal, the daughter of a minister of state, after being enchanted by hearing her reading from the Quran. While visiting Jamal, Gabru is apprehended one night by the king, disguised as a police constable roaming the city to ensure its safety. Gabru is sentenced to hang, and at the scene of the gallows, he waits anxiously for a last vision of his beloved. Jamal finally appears dressed as a man all in black (*syah posh*), riding a horse, wielding a dagger and a sword. She threatens to commit suicide by stabbing herself or drinking a cup of poison. The king is persuaded of the true love of the couple and marries them on the spot.

Similar tales of dangerous love between a highly ranked, valorous woman and a

commoner male abound in the Nautanki literature. In *Shirin Farhad*, the stonemason Farhad falls in love with queen Shirin while engaged in building a canal for her. Later he is given the task of digging a tunnel through an impenetrable mountain, and while he is working, Shirin rides out on horseback to meet him for a rendezvous. *Lakha Banjara* relates the love between a princess and Lakha, the son of a banjara (trader). Similar to *Syahposh* in many details, it culminates in Lakha's being arrested by a policeman while returning from the princess one night, followed by a death-sentence by the king, and the appearance of the princess at the gallows pleading with her father for her lover's release. However, in this story the king does not relent, Lakha is killed, and the lovers are united only after Guru Gorakhnath arrives and resuscitates Lakha.

Perhaps the most striking instance is the story of *Nautanki Shahzadi*, "The Princess Nautanki," whose name came to signify this theatre genre. 'Nautanki' means a woman whose weight is nine *tanks* (a *tank* equals four grams), implying that she was very delicate (at least in the beginning of the story). Phul Singh sets out in quest of her following a dare from his sister-in-law, travelling from Punjab to Multan, and finally gaining entrance to her private garden. There he courts her, but their love is discovered during the ritual weighing that occurs every day to test Nautanki's chastity. Sentenced by the king to hang, Phul Singh awaits his execution when suddenly Nautanki arrives at the gallows, dressed as a man and armed with sword and dagger. Phul Singh is content with this last glimpse of her, and he bids farewell to the world as the noose is placed around his neck. But Nautanki pulls out a cup of poison and prepares to commit suicide, vowing to die like Shirin died for Farhad and Laila for Majnun. As the executioners advance to pull the cord, she rushes with her dagger and drives them off. She then turns her sword on her father, demanding he pardon her lover at once. The king consents to the marriage and the two are wedded at once.

Although details differ, these stories all involve a romantic quest by a lover (usually a social inferior) for a princess. The quest is fraught with danger, expressed not only in the lover's travails in reaching the princess and obtaining her consent, but in the punishment meted out for violation of her honour. In each case, the princess becomes her lover's rescuer in the end. She braves social censure, daring to leave the seclusion of her palace and appear in public, thus demonstrating the great measure of her love. She also challenges the chief representative of society's moral order, the king or her father (frequently one and the same), by pleading for permission to marry and even threatening his life. To carry out her brave resolve, she transforms herself into a warrior figure, attired as a soldier on a horse, carrying weapons. In these cases then, the *virangana* shares some of the characteristics of the

historical queens, including the male costume, position on horseback, and protective use of sword and dagger. Her cause, however, is not defence of the homeland but salvation of her lover and achievement of ultimate union with him. She appears only as a *virangana* when her lover is mortally threatened, although her social superiority to the male invests her with power throughout the story.

The queenly type of *virangana* known to history has also been made the subject of Nautanki plays. Three plays with the title *Sangi! Maharani Tara* (presumably the Tarabai discussed earlier) appear in the catalogues of the British Museum and the India Office Library. Two plays exist on Maharani Durgavati, but the one in my collection appears to be quite a different story from that of Durgavati of Gondwana.

The most popular *virangana* story in the Nautanki world appears to be *Virangana Virmati*. Virmati and her husband Jagdev's tale was first recorded in dramatic form in 1876, but it reached prominence in the 1920s when the two most commonly performed versions of it were published, those of Shrikrishna Khatri of the Kanpur style of Nautanki and of Natharam Sharma Gaur of the Hathras style.<sup>42</sup> The present discussion follows Natharam's text.

King Udiyaditya of Malwa has two wives, Baghelin and Solankin. Baghelin's son is a coward, while Jagdev, son of Solankin, is brave and virtuous and his father's favourite. Baghelin fears that Jagdev may soon become king, and she forces the king to insult Jagdev by asking him to return the horse and swords he had presented to him previously. As a result, Jagdev leaves the court followed by his wife Virmati, who vows to be at his side no matter what difficulties lie ahead. After wandering for some time, they reach a lake, and Jagdev leaves his wife while he goes to find lodging in the nearby city. Virmati is then approached by a prostitute and enticed to the brothel of Jamoti, on the pretext that Jamoti is her husband's sister.

So far the events bear an uncanny resemblance to the *Ramayana* the rivalry between co-wives to determine whose son shall be heir, the exit of the favoured son, accompanied by his devoted wife, the wife's abandonment in the hostile forest and her abduction. At this point in the Nautanki, however, Virmati's similarity to the passive, patient Sita ends. Lalji, son of the Kotwal, tries to seduce Virmati, but she gets him drunk and then kills him with his own sword. She dumps the body from the window, and when the Kotwal discovers his dead son, he rushes in to the brothel to arrest her. However Virmati, still holding the sword, proceeds to kill twenty-five of the Kotwal's men. Jagdev eventually finds Virmati and the couple are welcomed by the king of the city. In this episode, Virmati's bravery is explicitly directed toward protecting her chastity (*pativrat dharm*). In the text, she is compared to a lioness (*sherni*) with bloodshot eyes and a fierce roar. She is also likened to

Kali dancing on the chest of her victims.<sup>43</sup>

In the second part of the story, Virmati proves herself capable of even greater courage when she beheads her own husband. Jagdev was tricked by the goddess Kankali (also called Kalika, both variants of Kali) into giving her his head, which she demanded as a religious gift (*dan*), in retribution for his assault on her son, the demon Kalua. Virmati impresses even the bloodthirsty Kankali with her tearless fulfilment of duty, and eventually Kankali joins Jagdev's head back to his body and revives him. Through this test, Virmati proves herself to be a true daughter of the goddess, and Kankali addresses her as such while Virmati in return addresses Kankali as mother. In the end, Jagdev and Virmati return home, where Baghelin has repented, and they all live happily.

In the *viranganas* in Nautanki, we see a shift from the brave acts of the historical queens in defence of their homeland, to brave deeds aimed at the preservation of a woman's family honour and sexual purity. The two are closely related; if a woman is married to a king, her chastity constitutes part of family honour, which is equated with the honour of the kingdom. The fundamental point of comparison is that in both cases women are fighting actively, moving on their own initiative and strength to protect themselves and gain their own victories. The imagery of the *virangana* is also remarkably consistent, with repeated mention of the woman riding on horseback, armed with sword and dagger.

#### CINEMA CLAIMS THE VIRANGANA

The early Indian cinema in many ways transported the folk theatre of the late 19th and early 20th centuries into the celluloid medium. The singers and actors from the theatre found new jobs for themselves in the film industry, and many of the former theatre managers and commercial backers joined to form film companies. The stories used in the first twenty or so years of Indian cinema repeated the popular plots from the Nautanki, Tamasha, and Parsi theatres, which had earlier inherited them from all-India and regional sources. As Pradip Kishen has noted, "that the cinema actively set out to displace folk entertainments is suggested by the fact that the cinema appropriated its forms, transposing its ingredients and often its subjects, into the standard fare of the Indian screen."<sup>44</sup>

Given these continuities, it is not surprising to find a veritable spate of films in the twenties, thirties and forties devoted to the *virangana* type. Among the silent movies of the twenties, the following were based on specific women-warriors discussed above: *Sati Veermai* (1921), *Devi Ahalyabai* (1925), and *Sultana Chandbibi* (1932); talking versions were later released of *Tara Sundari* (1934), *Sultana Chand Bibi* (1936), *Taramati* (1945), as well as several films on the other Rajput heroines like Padmini, Pannabai, and

Minaldevi. There were also a number of films dealing with less historical, and occasionally more fanciful, *viranganas*. In the silent category, these included: *A Fair Warrior* (1927), *Veerangana* (1928), *Female Feat* (1929), *Chatur Suñdari* (Wily Heroine), *Goddess of War* (Ran Chandi, based on Puranic mythology, 1930), *Shurvir Sharda* (Gallant Girl, 1930), *Valiant Princess* (1930), *Lioness* (1931), *Valiant Angel* (Chitod ki Veerangana, 1931), *Stree Shakti* (The Super Sex, 1932), *Daring Damsel* (Azad Abla, 1933), *The Amazon* (Dilruba Daku, 1933), and *The Lady Cavalier* (Ratna Lutari, 1933). Among the sound pictures, similar titles abound. *Veer Kumari* (1935), *Jungle Queen* (1936), *Chabuk wali* (1938), *Aflatoon Aurat* (Amazon, 1940), *Veerangana* (1947), and so on.<sup>45</sup> Worthy of special mention are the films that starred the actress Nadia: *Hunterwali* (1934), *Sher Dil*, *Lutaru Lalna* (1938), *Diamond Queen* (1940), and many others. These films, directed mostly by Homi Wadia, were extremely popular in the thirties and forties, and were part of the childhood experience of many of the actors and directors of today, as Girish Karnad recalls:

The single most memorable sound of my childhood is the clarion call of 'Hey-y-y-y-y' as Fearless Nadia, regal on her horse, her hand raised defiantly in the air, rode down upon the bad guys. To us school kids of the mid-40s Fearless Nadia meant courage, strength, idealism.<sup>46</sup>

In these films, Nadia played the valiant heroine who always comes to the rescue, her most frequent entrance, as recounted here, being on horseback. Stills from her films show her carrying every conceivable kind of weapon—bow and arrow, sword, bullwhip, and pistol—as well as lifting men over her head and throwing them.

The theatrical origins of Nadia's role are suggested in the following excerpt, which seems to describe the *Syahposh* type of *virangana* discussed above:

The good king was imprisoned by the scheming minister. The righteous among the subjects were tortured or locked up. The helpless princess, driven to despair, unable to find succour finally decided to act on her own and set things right. And in a moment, the large fair woman, whose discomfort seemed to arise more from the sari she was wrapped in than from the political situation, transformed herself into a masked woman, in tight black costume, who could ride, swim, fight, wrestle, fence and even take a reverse jump from ground to balcony.<sup>47</sup>

The Nadia/Wadia productions, beginning with *Hunterwali* (The Lady with the Whip), created a new genre, the stunt film, but without the luxuries of stunt directors, duplicate stuntmen, and the trick photography of today. The famous train films like *Frontier Mail* (1936) also originated at this time, with Nadia performing daring feats on the top of moving trains. These popular genres eventually gave way to the 'socials', family dramas involving more 'realistic'

situations, although current films still incorporate noticeable *virangana* elements.

Prior to independence in 1947, films suggesting nationalist messages were strictly censored. It is significant that not one film on the list above appears with the Rani of Jhansi, the most famous *virangana*, as its heroine. The Rani was simply too potent a nationalist symbol to be allowed on the screen. Articles, poems, plays, even the noted Hindi novel by Vrindavan Lal Verma on the Rani of Jhansi, were immediately banned upon publication.<sup>48</sup> In the absence of such readily understood nationalist images, one wonders how much patriotic content was more covertly conveyed through figures like Fearless Nadia and the other cinematic *viranganas*. The popularity of these films seems to be linked to their allegorical political content.

This is not to deny the obvious entertainment value which the *virangana* came to possess in the process of becoming a cinematic image. The wonderment and reverence associated with the earlier legends of valiant women now acquired a cruder colouring as heroic feats were converted into 'stunts', and the female body was displayed in erotically charged, athletic poses. Nonetheless the cinematic *virangana* emerging in this period indicates the full assimilation of the paradigm into the popular culture of the twentieth century.

The most recent manifestation of this type is the female outlaw figure, counterpart to the Robin Hood-like male outlaw or dacoit (*daku*), a common subject of north India folklore. Just as the *daku* is considered a raja or king by his followers and the villagers within his territory, so too the 'bandit queen' shares the symbolic character of sovereignty with the historical queens discussed above. She is a woman of indomitable courage, a merciless executrix of justice. Adored by her people both for her beauty and her power, she leads her gang, utilising the same weapons and costume as her male cohorts. Former *viranganas* defended their kingdoms and fought enemies of opposing ethnic and religious composition; the female outlaw fights the police, the landlords, and the wealthy, and she defends the rights of the poor and oppressed. Since the 1960s and 70s, she is increasingly a low-caste heroine, in alliance with the disprivileged in rural society, in opposition to brahmins, thakurs, and government officials.

The female outlaw as a sub-type of the *virangana* appeared in several films of the thirties, e.g., *Lady Robinhood*, *The Amazon (Dilruba Daku)*, and *Lady Cavalier (Ratna Lutari)*. Numerous legends grew up around Putli Bai, a famous one-armed dacoit of the fifties, celebrating her exploits in the Chambal Valley.<sup>49</sup> But the most widely publicised story has been that of Phulan Devi, whose recent career has been featured in international magazines like *Time* and *Esquire* on the one hand, and who on the other hand has inspired folk poets to compose Nautan-

kis, Barahmasis, Birahas, and other folklore genres in Hindi dialects. Several Hindi films have been produced about her, including the rather faithful version of her life, *Kahani Phulvati ki*.<sup>50</sup> Clay idols of her have been sold together with other gods and goddesses in the local markets.<sup>51</sup> Her example has made such an impact that many other women of her region have become dacoits.<sup>52</sup> By 1986, bandit gangs considered it *de rigueur* to have at least one female member.<sup>53</sup>

Prior to her arrest in 1983, Phulan had become a media phenomenon, the object of sensationalistic exaggeration and romanticisation nourished by lack of concrete information. Since the release of photographs taken at her surrender and the publication of various interviews conducted in jail, the fantastic rumours about her beauty and charm have been put to rest, and the myth has been partially dismantled. Nonetheless it is a measure of the meaningfulness of Phulan's story that it continues to be an oft-told one, and that in its essential details there is little variance between the many types of sources, be they folk poems or journalistic accounts. The following synopsis is a composite of elements drawn from folk and media sources.

Phulan was born a Mallah (boatman caste), in 1956 in a village in Jalaun district, UP. The chain of exploitation that characterises her life began with her marriage at the age of ten to a lustful widower twenty years her senior. When she escaped from his advances and returned to her village, the panchayat expelled her, and she went to live with an uncle whose sons and friends harassed her. According to some folk accounts, she then met a dacoit named Kailash and married him in court, but was later offered to his friend Vikram (another Mallah) and the gang leader Babu Gujar for their sexual enjoyment. She was arrested on a robbery charge and spent three weeks in police custody where she was sexually assaulted. Released through the good graces of a thakur, she was afterwards forced to become his concubine. Kailash meanwhile was killed by the police, and Phulan came under Vikram's protection. After killing Babu Gujar, Vikram established himself as a gang leader with Phulan as his mistress. He taught her to shoot, and the two began a series of robberies and murders in the Chambal region. Internal feuding in the gang led to Vikram being killed by Sriram and Lalaram, two thakur gang members. They kidnapped Phulan Devi, took her to Behmai village, and kept her captive while she was raped by a number of other thakur men for several days. Beaten and humiliated, she was forced to draw water from the village and serve the men. This incident fuelled Phulan's final revenge. After escaping from Behmai, she joined with another dacoit, Mustaqim, and returned with his gang to Behmai to avenge the murder of Vikram and repay the thakurs for dishonouring her. She lined up twenty thakur men and massacred them on Valen-



tine's Day, 1981. After evading police pursuit for two years, she was finally sent to jail in Madhya Pradesh following a negotiated surrender with the police.

The central theme of Phulan's life, as interpreted to popular opinion, is one of repeated victimisation, particularly sexual assault by men, leading eventually to resistance and counter-attack upon the perpetrators. Phulan was robbed and looted of her chastity ('to rape' in Hindi is *izzat lutna*, 'to steal one's honour'), and so she turns to robbing and looting in return. Her struggle has much to do with the oppressive caste system of rural north India. As a low-caste woman, she was raped many times by high-caste men, and it is towards them that she directs her avenging fury. As she states in the Nautanki play *Phulan Debi*:

Thakurs have done whatever they wanted with me. High-caste men always played with my honour. Not until I shoot them each one by one will their oppression of me be repaid.<sup>54</sup>

Becoming a bandit, she dressed in the khaki uniform of a senior superintendent of police, tied a headband around her cropped hair, donned running shoes, and toted a rifle—a modern-day equivalent to the turbaned, sword-wielding historical *virangana* on horseback. In defending her honour, and that of all low-caste women, Phulan is a woman-warrior who secures the triumph of the sexually and economically exploited. She continues the noble tradition of valiant women who protect themselves and others through their own courageous, albeit bloody, deeds.

In the masculinist press, Phulan has been portrayed as an irresistible, insatiable man-eater. The image constructed of her combines elements of wild beauty, seductiveness, and extraordinary danger. *Esquire* describes her as "a legendary six-foot-tall, raven-haired, one-armed beauty", "a beautiful femme fatale who had butchered twice as many men as she had bedded".<sup>55</sup> There is no doubt that a genuine terror of her (as of dacoits in general) existed in the countryside in the months following the Behmai massacre and preceding her capture. However, it is noteworthy that Phulan has also become a symbol of women's liberation, to urban Indians as well as to the rural women who emulate her. Phulan and her sister-bandits, Kusuma Nain, Meera Thakur, and others, have been called "beacon of hope for countless young women who have a score to settle with society."<sup>56</sup> In Bombay and Delhi, Phulan "appeared to represent the ideas expressed by such feminists as Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, and Germaine Greer," in her stance as "the new woman... a brash Amazon who had risen above her caste and the traditionally subservient position of the Indian female."<sup>57</sup>

Phulan achieved prominence in an era in which more and more women were emerging from their domestic seclusion and taking up positions side by side with men in schools and colleges, in the workplace, in politics

and public life. Her powerful presence has quickened awareness about the changes that await both women and men in the years to come. For some, she has heightened anxieties about the current transformation underway in women's roles, while for others she has come to inspire determined commitment to the struggle for equality and justice for women. In Phulan, the contemporary incarnation of the *virangana* lives on.

#### CONCLUSION

This preliminary survey establishes the wide range of contexts in which the *virangana* appears in north Indian history and myth. Despite the differences that have been noted among warrior queens, folklore heroines, and their cultural equivalents today, these women share an ideology based on valour, and physical prowess, and an iconography which represents these qualities through the sword, the horse, and male attire. Their stories are sufficiently similar to allow us to characterise the *virangana* as a type, and a type of considerable persistence and prestige, instead of viewing each instance as an anomaly unrelated to a larger pattern.

As such, the *virangana* compels us to revise the earlier typologies of women limited to epic heroines and mother goddesses. This female figure refuses to fit the polarities encompassed by the pairs good woman/bad woman, chaste/unchaste, self-denying/all-destroying. Nor is she defined by her relationship to a male, and for this reason, her sexuality is inconsequential. She is virtuous and strong, powerful and prudent, physically adept and wise. Rather than reversing any one particular role which may be viewed as dominant, the *virangana* moves beyond the roles for women prescribed by patriarchal society. She transcends and subverts the categories which ordinarily divorce power, strength, and independence in women from goodness, charity, and nurturance of others.

The *virangana* constitutes an alternative paradigm of womanhood, repeatedly surfacing to challenge the patriarchal premises of north Indian society and assert the female potential for power as well as virtue. The tales summarised here point to a 'herstory', suppressed and forced underground at times, but constantly re-emerging into popular consciousness through memory and celebration. In the search for mythic identity within the boundaries of cultural authenticity, the *virangana* present a valuable model for today's women, as well as a timeless reminder of the achievements of the past.

#### Notes

- 1 Witness the recent spate of hi-tech film and television versions of the great epics in India.
- 2 Kishwar, *In Search*, 46.
- 3 Kishwar, *In Search*, 47.
- 4 Dworkin, 42.
- 5 Dworkin, 32-33.
- 6 See the volume edited by Blackburn, et al.

- 7 The account of Doranne Jacobson's informant Bhuri, a Brahmin village woman from Madhya Pradesh, suggests that the 'chaste wife' norm is observed more in the breach than the practice.
- 8 Liddle and Joshi, 55.
- 9 Liddle and Joshi, 56.
- 10 Robinson, 188.
- 11 Pool, 86.
- 12 Madhavananda, 321; also Tod, 211.
- 13 The Amar Chitra Katha version notes that she first intended to become a *sati* but decided to raise her son instead.
- 14 Abul Fazl, cited in Madhavananda, 323-324.
- 15 Madhavananda, 324.
- 16 Cited in Madhavananda, 324.
- 17 Madhavananda, 392.
- 18 Pool, 143-44.
- 19 Tod, 237.
- 20 Madhavananda, 359; see also Amar Chitra Katha comic, 5-6.
- 21 In the Amar Chitra Katha version, Ahalya wavers between the selfish performance of *sati* for her own salvation, and the decision to dedicate her life to the service of others, 12-13.
- 22 Malcolm, 162.
- 23 Malcolm, 179.
- 24 Malcolm, 194.
- 25 Lebra-Chapman, 16.
- 26 Lebra-Chapman, 19, 22.
- 27 Sinha, 97.
- 28 Lebra-Chapman, 93.
- 29 Sinha, 97.
- 30 Kinsley, 97.
- 31 Jayawardena, 78.
- 32 Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj', 13.
- 33 Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj', 17.
- 34 Conversation with Tara Sinha.
- 35 Jayawardena, 95-97.
- 36 For Sarojini Naidu's role in invoking the epic heroines, see Ratte 367-370.
- 37 Kishwar, *In Search*, 47.
- 38 Jayawardena, 98.
- 39 Lebra-Chapman, 143-146.
- 40 Lebra-Chapman, 150.
- 41 Lebra-Chapman, 149.
- 42 Other narrative versions of it are contained in R C Temple's *The Legends of the Panjab*, II: 182-203, and *Bhartiya Viranganaen*, 58-71.
- 43 Gaur, 1, 42-43.
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