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Book Review

**Queeny Pradhan. *Ranis & The Raj: The Pen and the Sword*,
Penguin Viking, Gurugram (India), 2022. Pp. 336. Rs.699.**

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When the British East India Company wrought havoc with the Indian princes and their principalities, many of the native rulers or kings had to struggle a lot in order to save their principalities with the help of the tradition of their native rules of adoption and successors to their thrones. But the inhuman laws of the East India Company, culminating in Lord Dalhousie's Doctrine of Lapse, struck a death blow to many of them. It is also quite ironical that these kings or rulers, in spite of having many wives and concubines, could not have their own progeny, which came in very handy to the predator East India Company authorities. In this struggle with the British Raj the queens had to suffer no less than their husbands, when they lost them and becoming their widows they took the reins of administration in their hands. They struggled hard with the East India Company both through the pen and through the sword. In other words, they tried to appeal to and convince the latter about their traditional rules of adoption and successorship and to fight with them when the latter did not respond to them positively. There are many such Ranis known for their patriotism and heroism, resistance and diplomacy, but they yet they have suffered the curse of invisibility due to their gender in the patriarchal set up of our country. Indian history has been unduly silent about them and relegated them to the limbo of oblivion. That is the reason why many Indians know nothing about the heroic Ranis of India other than

perhaps the Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi. Now that Queeny Pradhan has focused on this neglected dark area of Indian historiography, she has unearthed the details of such heroic Ranis from the realm of oblivion and brought them to light, which is highly admirable. She has taken a broad perspective of pan-Indian historiographical approach to these Ranis and shown them in a comparative light. Consequently she has highlighted the lives of six Ranis like Rani Chennamma of Kittur, Mahrani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, Maharani Jindan of Punjab, Rani Zeenat Mahal of the Moghuls, Guleri Rani of Sirmur and Queen Menchi of Sikkim by studying the archival records and offering a coherent picture through elaborate documentation with exact dates and facts, strenuous field work (which includes the study of para - history or oral history supplied by folk songs) and feminist interpretation. In other words, she has offered a micro-historical picture of these Ranis from a macro-historical perspective, complementing each other. Obviously she has visited the historical places from Delhi to Kittur in North Karnataka of South India and from Punjab to Sikkim, met and interviewed people and listened to the folk songs connected with these Ranis. Then she has displayed her professional expertise in strenuously going through the historical archives maintained by the different State Governments in India.

After offering an elaborate picture of the micro-histories of these Ranis, she has come out with some general observations about the lives of these Ranis and sees a common pattern in them in spite of some minor variations. The observation of these generalities is of utmost importance both to the professional historians and to the literary scholars. For example, she has shown how these Ranis having lost their husbands and having no children of their own or having only minor children, had to take up the reins of administration into their hands and try to protect the interests of their sons against the onslaught of the predatory British East India Company. In spite of being hemmed in by the traditional patriarchal framework of their society, they showed extraordinary practical wisdom in representing their views to the alien government and in fighting against them by galvanizing their own military forces by kindling patriotic feelings in them. Thus according to the nationalist historiography they emerged as heroic queens. But according to the imperial historiography, these Ranis were inefficient or scheming, or libidinous and intolerant of the alien rule. (One such example of colonizer's prejudice may be seen in the Australian writer, Tom Gibson's *A Soldier of India*, in which he presents the Rani of Jhansi in a negative light as a libidinous Rani having an illegal affair with a British officer.) The historical records of the East India Company never mentioned the names of these Ranis as they thought them to be just

nonentities thereby pushing them to the limbo of oblivion and invisibility. Dr. Queeny Pradhan rightly observes how the British authorities were unscrupulous in breaking the treaties for their commercial interests and greed for land and its huge income and their ultimate design to annex the local principalities one by one on some pretext or the other more by political force than by legal procedures. Their malicious machinations were supported by their modern weapons as against the primitive ones of the native soldiers. The British records always play down the Indians for their inability to rule themselves and therefore take up the civilizing mission on their shoulders. But their secret weaning of Indian informants and betrayers towards them and their ‘divide and rule’ policy and such other nefarious and underhand activities are never mentioned in their official records. Thus there is great need for re-writing the history of India, in this case all the Ranis and Rajas from the viewpoint of the colonized and set the records straight. Dr. Queen Pradhan has to be amply congratulated for offering a pan-Indian perspective on the select six Ranis of India and set a model for other researchers, who can take up a similar project on other Ranis and kings who fought against the British Raj. As for the number of Ranis in India, they are several in numbers but are not mentioned and studied openly so far. For example, Karnataka itself can boast of more than twenty Ranis like Rani Chennamma of Keladi, Rani Abbakka of Chowta, Rani Shantala, wife of King Vishnuvardhana of Dwarasamudra, Rani Attimabbe and so on known for their heroism, religious tolerance, munificence, philanthropy etc. There must be equal number of Ranis in other States as well. Now that our research and studies in Indian Universities and Institutes have been liberating themselves from the colonial intellectual slavery and taking an Indian (or native or post-colonial) turn, it is high time for other historians to take up such projects on neglected but fertile areas of research by having recourse to field work and oral history and para-history to complement the sketchily written history and setting things right. Dr. Queeny Pradhan’s research work is more important to the literary scholars than to historians for many reasons, as it supplies a sound foundation for the researchers in historical fiction and drama. For example, out of six Ranis covered by Queeny Pradhan only three are celebrated and immortalized in Indian English fiction and drama as well as in folk poetry, (*The Queen of Kittur* by Basavaraj Naikar, *The Rani of Jhansi* by Jayshree Mishra and *The Last Queen* by Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni) but the other three Ranis are totally neglected by the Indian English novelists and playwrights.

Like the Ranis, there are many male freedom fighters, who fought against the British East India Company and lost their principalities due to the machinations of the Company Sarkar and betrayal by their own people. Bhaskararao Bhave (Babasaheb) of Naragund principality in South India, Tipu Sultan of Mysuru and Bahadur Shah of Delhi have been celebrated and immortalized in Indian Fiction and Drama (by Basavaraj Naikar, H.S.Shivaprakash/Girish Karnad and G.D.Khosla respectively), but several others of other principalities have not been celebrated in Indian English Literature, which is unfortunate and tragic. The reason is known to all. Writing research-based historical novels is definitely more difficult and challenging than writing contemporary novels. It is high time for Indian English novelists and playwrights to concentrate their attention on other neglected figures of freedom fighters, who fought with the East India Company and lost their kingdoms.

In spite of this digression, it may be said that Queeny Pradhan's book, *Ranis & the Raj* is an excellent one in its systematic presentation and coverage of the topic from a wide perspective thereby setting a model for other historical researchers of India.

It is said that even Aristotle nods sometimes. Likewise, even the editor of Penguin Books has nodded some times and allowed the editorial slips creep into the text –like the use of normal numbers instead of diacritical superscripts (p.212), 'Rayana' for 'Rayanna' (p.316), and 'Rani Kittur' for 'Rani of Kittur'(p.309). Such minor mistakes could be corrected in the future editions. In spite of all such minor editorial oversights the enormous importance of *Ranis & the Raj* cannot be ignored at all. *Kudos* to Queeny Pradhan.