

## 500th birth anniversary of Rani Abbakka Chowta

### The Warrior Queen who defeated the Portuguese



#### Introduction

Abbakka Rani or Abbakka Mahadevi was the queen of Tulunadu who fought the Portuguese in the latter half of the 16th century. Born in 1525 CE, she belonged to the Chowta dynasty who ruled over the area from the temple town of Moodabidri. The port town of [Ullal](#) served as their subsidiary capital.

#### Early Life

The Chowtas followed a matrilineal system by which Tirumala Raya, Abbakka's uncle, crowned her the queen of Ullal. He also forged a matrimonial alliance for Abbakka with Lakshmappa Arasa, the powerful king of neighbouring Mangalore. This alliance was to later prove a source of worry for the Portuguese. Tirumala Raya also trained Abbakka in the different aspects of warfare and military strategy. The marriage, however, was short lived and Abbakka returned to Ullal. Her husband thus longed for revenge against Abbakka and was to later join the Portuguese in their fight against Abbakka.

#### Bravery

The Portuguese made several attempts to capture Ullal as it was strategically placed. But Abbakka repulsed each of their attacks for over four decades. For her bravery, she came to be known as Abhaya Rani ('The fearless queen'). She was also one of the earliest Indians to fight the colonial powers and is sometimes regarded as the 'first woman freedom fighter of India'.

Rani Abbakka, though a Queen of a little known small princely state, Ullal, was a magnetic woman of indomitable courage and patriotism. While Rani of Jhansi has become a symbol of courage, Abbakka, nearly 300 years her predecessor, has

been largely forgotten by history. Her furious wars with Portuguese are not well recorded. But whatever is available speaks of a luminous personality of awesome valour and bravery.

## **Personal Life**

According to local legends. Abbakka was an extraordinary child and as she grew up showed signs of being a visionary. there was no equal to her in military science and warfare, mainly in archery and sword fighting. Her father encouraged her in this and after she was well versed in all areas. She was married to Lakshmappa Arasa Bangaraja II, king of the Banga principality in Mangalore.

Rani Abbakka didn't have a happy marriage. Her husband had tried to convince her to not defy the Portuguese. He also wanted their daughter to get married to his nephew, a political alliance that would cement the relationship between Ullal and Bangadi further. Abbakka was completely against this marriage and wanted her daughter to marry a worthy husband. When her husband tried to kidnap their daughter and force her into this alliance, Abbakka rescued her and arranged her marriage to a noble prince. Enraged by her actions, her husband joined hands with the Portuguese to seek revenge for his humiliation. However, it did not matter to the principled queen; Rani Abbakka believed in her decisions and stood by them even though it meant going against her husband. Abbakka returned to Ullal.

## **Location of Ullal**

Ullal fort, the capital of Abbakka's kingdom, is located just a few kilometers away from the city of Mangalore, on the shores of the Arabian Sea. It is a historical as well as a pilgrim spot because of the beautiful Shiva Temple built by the Queen and a unique natural rock, called the Rudra Rock. The rock appears to change colours every second, as the sweater splashes on it.

## **Historical Background**

After overrunning Goa and taking control of it, the Portuguese turned their attention southwards and along the coast. They first attacked the South Kanara coast in 1525 and destroyed the Mangalore port. Ullal was a prosperous port and a hub of the spice trade to Arabia and other countries in the west. Being the profitable trading center that it was, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British vied with one another for control of the region as well as the trade routes. They however, had not been able to make much headway as the resistance from the local chieftains was very strong. The local rulers even forged alliances cutting across caste and religion lines.

Though Abbakka was a Jain by faith, her administration was well represented by Hindus and Muslims. Her army too consisted of people of all sects and castes including the Mogaveeras, a fisher folk community. She even forged alliances with the Zamorin of Calicut and other Muslim rulers south of Tulunadu towards this end. Together, they kept the Portuguese at bay.

In those times, the Portuguese suppressed any attempts of the rulers to have direct trade with other foreign countries. Rani Abbakka was determined to trade on her own terms for the benefit of her own people, not according to the rules set by the Portuguese. This spark of rebellion against colonialism coming from a queen not only stunned the Portuguese but also some of her own feeble ministers.

## **War with Portuguese**

## **First Attack**

The first attack by the Portuguese in south Kanara coast had taken place in 1525, when they destroyed the Mangalore port. Rani Abbakka who had been alerted by the incident, started preparing herself to protect her kingdom. Determined to avenge the defeat of her mother at the hands of Portuguese, she strived hard to drive the Portuguese completely out of Mangalore.

## **Second Attack**

When Rani Abbakka was crowned the queen of Ullal, she decided she would completely stop paying the Portuguese the tribute that all the local rulers paid them. In 1555, a Portuguese envoy was sent to Rani Abbakka to remind her to pay up. Abbakka firmly refused to bow to their demands. The furious Portuguese army planned to capture Ullal at once. The Portuguese sent Admiral Dom Álvaro da Silveira to fight her. In the battle that followed, Rani Abbakka managed to hold her own and repulsed the attack successfully.

Inspired by their queen, the soldiers of Ullal fought bravely in the battle and ultimately captured the Mangalore fort from the Portuguese. The Portuguese ended up surrendering to the fearless soldiers and beating a hasty retreat.

## **Third Attack**

In 1557, the Portuguese plundered Mangalore and laid it waste.

In 1558 the Portuguese Army perpetrated another wanton cruelty on Mangalore, putting to death a number of men and women, both young and old, plundering a temple, burning ships and finally setting the city itself on fire.

## **Fourth Attack**

Again, in 1567, the Portuguese army attacked Ullal, showering death and destruction. The great Queen Abbakka resisted it.

## **Fifth Attack**

In 1568, João Peixoto, a Portuguese general and a fleet of soldiers were sent by the Portuguese Viceroy António Noronha. They managed to capture the city of Ullal and also entered the royal court. Abbakka Rani, however, escaped and took refuge in a mosque. The same night, she gathered around 200 of her soldiers and mounted an attack on the Portuguese. In the battle that ensued, General Peixoto was killed, seventy Portuguese soldiers were taken prisoners and many of the Portuguese retreated. In further attacks, Abbakka Rani and her supporters killed Admiral Mascarenhas and the Portuguese were also forced to vacate the Mangalore fort.

## **Sixth Attack**

In 1569 however, the Portuguese not only regained the Mangalore fort but also captured Kundapur (Basrur). Despite these gains, Abbakka Rani continued to remain a source of threat. With the help of the queen's estranged husband, they mounted attacks on Ullal. Furious battles followed but Abbakka Rani held her own. In 1570, she formed an alliance with the Bijapur Sultan of Ahmed Nagar and the Zamorine of Calicut, who were also opposing the Portuguese. Kutty Pokar Markar, the Zamorine's general fought on behalf of Abbakka and destroyed the Portuguese fort at Mangalore but

while returning he was killed by the Portuguese. Following these losses and her husband's treachery, Abbakka lost the war, was arrested and jailed. However, even in prison she revolted and died fighting.

## Legend

According to traditional accounts, she was an immensely popular queen and this is also attested by the fact that she is even today a part of folklore. The queen's story has been retold from generation to generation through folk songs and Yakshagana, a popular folk theatre in Tulu Nadu. In Bhuta Kola, a local ritual dance, the persona in trance recounts the great deeds of Abbakka Mahadevi. Abbakka is portrayed as dark and good looking, always dressed in simple clothes like a commoner. She is portrayed as a caring queen who worked late into the night dispensing justice. Legends also claim that Abbakka was the last known person to have used the Agnivana (fire-arrow) in her fight against the Portuguese. She had two equally valiant daughters who fought alongside her in her wars against the Portuguese. Her defiance continued to inspire her daughters, who carried forward her legacy of resistance. Through their courage, the fight against the Portuguese endured.

Rani Abbakka built Ullal Fort and Shiva Mandir. She also built the mystical Rudra Rock, whose hues shift with the crashing waves and stands as a timeless symbol of her defiance.

## Remembering the Great Queen

Abbakka's memory is much cherished in her home town of Ullal. The "Veera Rani Abbakka Utsava" is an annual celebration held in her memory. The Veera Rani Abbakka Prashasti(award) is awarded to distinguished women on the occasion. On January 15, 2003, the Indian postal department issued a special cover on Rani Abbakka. There have been calls to name the Bajpe airport and a naval vessel after the queen. A bronze statue of the queen has been erected in Ullal and another in Bangalore. The Karnataka Itihasa Academy has called for renaming the Queen's road in the state capital as 'Rani Abbakka Devi road'.

