

# Film Review: Syrupy Manikarnika biopic fails to inspire



CHENNAI: This is the year of parliamentary elections in India, and there are films pushing the agenda of political rulers and evoking patriotic fervor.

The latest work in this line is “Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi.” A legendary figure in the country’s history, Manikarnika ruled the princely state of Jhansi in northern India in the early 19th century following the death of her husband, the king.

Better known as Lakshmibai, a name given to her after marriage, she fought the British East India Co., then turning from trader into conqueror and eventually paving the way for the British Crown to take over India.

The biopic – co-directed by Kangana Ranaut, who also plays the title role, and Radha Krishna Jagarlamudi – unabashedly reveres its main character.

The movie begins with Lakshmibai tranquilizing a charging tiger, her hands firmly gripping the bow, her focus unflinching. Marriage and a child later, she faces one tragedy after another. With both her baby boy and husband dead, the British East India Co. tries every conceivable way to humiliate her and capture the kingdom, then famed for its riches.

With the neighboring princely states bullied into subservience by the British,

Lakshmibai finds herself alone, but fearless. Boosting her grit and determination is the undying support of her subjects, including women who take up arms to fight alongside her against the might of foreign guns and cannons.

However, the 148-minute movie does not go beyond syrupy storytelling, and remains more like a publicity stunt for Ranaut, whose reported differences of opinion with the production team, including an earlier director who quit, appear to have impeded what could have been a compelling take on one of India's most significant struggles against the colonial power.

The camera is seldom allowed to move away from her, as she leaps and slices her enemies with her sword, screaming "Har Har Mahadev," a battle cry evoking the blessings of a Hindu deity.

The performance is exaggerated and superfluous, hardly ever moving or memorable. Only Danny Denzongpa in the entire cast makes an impression as Ghose Khan, Lakshmibai's loyal army commander.

The grand sets replicating the royal court in Jhansi and the glittering costumes seem like mere embellishments to the narrative, which is also preachy and ponderous.

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