

BOOK EXCERPT

This book for children remembers Jhalkari Bai, leader of the women's wing of Rani Laxmibai's army

An excerpt from 'The Incredible Life of Jhalkari Bai: The Braveheart Warrior,' by Swati Sengupta. Illustrations by Devashish Verma.

Swati Sengupta

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A statue of Jhalkari Bai. | Wikimedia Commons

She loved exploring the unknown. Sometimes, she would walk right up to the rugged hilltop to watch the sun, like a huge ball of fire, bob up in the sky, filling the land with wondrous colours. Sometimes, she would explore the depths of the forest when she went to collect wood for the kitchen fire. Today, Jhalri had ventured deep into the forest. She slashed a few dried branches with the axe she was carrying. When there were enough twigs and branches, she tied them with a rope. It was a heavy bunch, enough to last for a few days.

The teenage Jhalri tottered under its weight, but quickly regained her balance. Her father, Sadova Singh, had taught her to be strong. He always encouraged her to run, jump, and do other physical activities that would help build a strong body. A strong body gives you the confidence to have a strong mind, he said.

Jhalri could walk for hours under the hot sun of Bhojla and not get tired. In fact, she enjoyed the heat. She loved the winter chill just as much. Her father would set fire to dry leaves and twigs, which would burn all evening to keep them warm.

Their village, Bhojla, was 10 kilometres from Jhansi. The king and the queen lived in Jhansi, where, she had heard, there was an enormous fort that King Virsingha had built many years ago. Jhalri often thought about Jhansi, the king, queen, the palace and how brave the soldiers in their army must be. Now, as she walked through the forest, her mind drifted once more to Jhansi and its illustrious kings who had ruled over this land for so many years.

Secretly, Jhalri wanted to be a soldier and fight in the army. She took a long, dry branch and imagined it to be a sword. She whipped the branch through the air and thought how she would plunge the sword into the enemy's chest. In her mind's eye, she could see the soldier drop dead in a single blow. She pulled out the sword blade and lifted it up in the air, victorious. She imagined thousands of people applauding her feat.

The silence of the forest was enchanting. This was her own world which she ruled. She picked up the bunch of twigs and branches on her head once more. She needed to head home now and help her father with the cooking. But right then, something sent a cold shiver down her spine! Her eyes met another pair of eyes from behind the bushes, just a few feet away. Those were not human eyes.

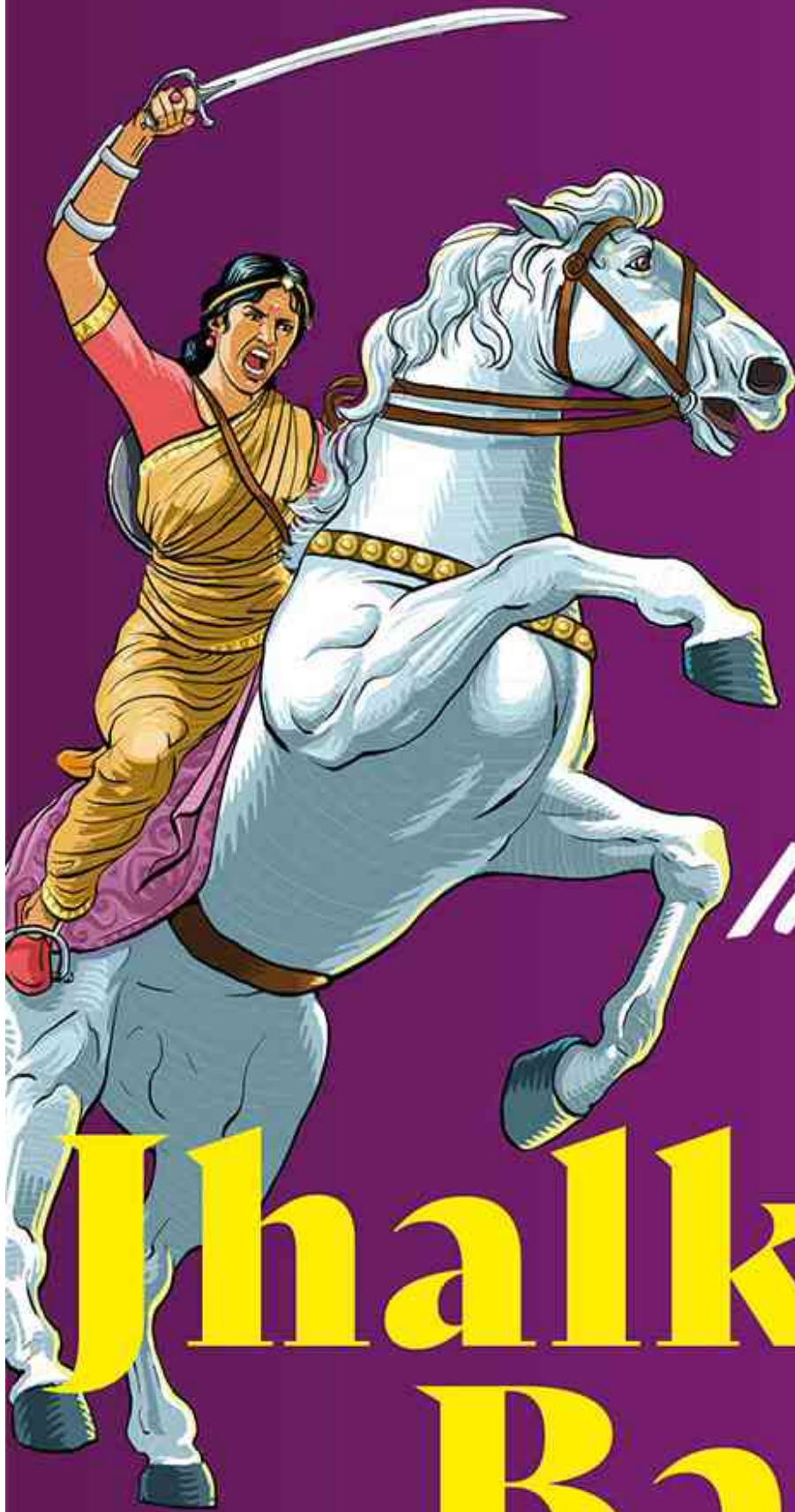
Jhalri knew that the best way to defend herself from wild animals was to remain still. So she pretended to be a statue. But the screams of a goat at a distance suddenly alarmed her and she fell on the ground with her bundle of firewood. The tiger, its eyes glowing now, got alarmed too. It began to growl under its breath, its piercing eyes looking straight at Jhalri.

Tigers would not attack humans unless they had some bitter experience with them in the past. Perhaps that's why it was so angry? Perhaps it was old and hurt and hadn't got enough to eat for the past few days? For whatever reason, the huge animal lunged at Jhalri now.

Swiftly, the young girl reached for the axe tied to her waist. She aimed it at the attacking tiger from a distance. The axe missed and flew through the air in a curve and got stuck in a tree trunk. She was now totally unarmed, her only weapon, her strength. She jumped into the air and caught hold of the tiger's forelimbs with her two hands and walloped the animal with one powerful blow. It was a huge tiger, perhaps several times heavier than she was. It fell back on the ground, startled and hurt. But then it quickly steadied itself and gave out a roar that pierced the stillness of the forest.

Bruised and angry, it swiped at Jhalri's face with its forelimb. She swiftly ducked. Though it missed her face, the tiger's claws slashed her flesh and lacerated her arm. Blood gushed out. The pain made her head spin. She was now wrestling on the ground with the tiger.

The animal was strong and powerful, and so was Jhalri.



*The
Incredible
Life of*

Jhalkari Bai

The Braveheart Warrior

Swati Sengupta

Excerpted with permission from The Incredible Life of Jhalkari Bai: The Braveheart Warrior, Swati Sengupta, illustrated by Devashish Verma, Talking Cub.

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