

The Most Admired Karnataka Queen Belawadi Mallamma: Role and Legacy

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Abstract

Belawadi Mallamma (1624–1678) was a great warrior queen from Belawadi, a minor princely state of Karnataka. She is known for her great leadership and resistance against invaders during a period of significant conflict in the region. Ruling from Belawadi in North Karnataka's Bailhongal place of the Belagavi districts. Basically she was the daughter of Sonde King Madhulinga Nayak, a Lingayat Vassal of the Vijayanagara Empire. Mallamma renowned for her academic excellence and intelligence from youth, Mallamma married Isaprabhu after he triumphed in her Swayamvara. When Maratha soldiers stole cattle from Belawadi, she mobilized an army of women, launching a surprise assault on their camp. Catching the unprepared troops off guard, her forces inflicted heavy casualties, reclaimed the livestock, and secured a decisive victory. Enraged by the theft, Chhatrapati Shivaji dispatched a larger army led by General Dadaji. In the ensuing battle, Isaprabhu was fatally stabbed from behind, prompting Mallamma to assume command and lead her women warriors with unyielding resolve. Captured and presented to Shivaji, she learned he had ordered her husband's live capture, not death, and graciously forgave him upon recognizing his lack of intent. This act of clemency not only preserved peace but also earned Shivaji's admiration, highlighting her diplomatic wisdom in protecting her land amid regional conflicts. In cultural patronage, Mallamma promoted intelligence, community values, and resilience, fostering a legacy of empowerment in Karnataka. Her story, rooted in Lingayata faith and scholarly pursuits, emphasized education and unity, inspiring folk narratives that celebrate female valour and ethical leadership. By leading women in defense, she challenged patriarchal norms, encouraging communal solidarity and land stewardship as cultural ideals. Mallamma's tale continues to motivate Karnataka's heritage, symbolizing how individual agency can safeguard and enrich regional identity.

Keywords: Swayamvara, Desai, Female Bodyguards, Tiger-Hunting, Original Manuscript, Brave, Valour, Corroborate, Archery, Resistance and Stole Cattle.

Introduction:

The Kannadigas were high-spirited souls of courage and energy. They valued freedom more than their lives and would not reconcile themselves to a life of humiliation. Thus, Karnataka's history is full of thrilling stories of the exemplary sacrifices of brave women. High ideals inspired them to dedicate their lives to the service of the people. Many achieved distinctions in literary, social, and spiritual fields, and their achievements in administration and war constitute a proud heritage of Karnataka. It is noted that not only men, but also women, have also played a significant role in retaining their freedom by fighting against their enemies. The women of Karnataka have played a significant role in the freedom movement, even before the British, to protect their kingdoms and territories. These women were from the royal families of rulers. Almost all of them were queens and fought the battle so as to protect their motherland. A few such brave queen warriors include Rani Chennamma of Kittur in the Belgaum district; Abbakka, queen of the Ullal Kingdom of South Kanara; Rani Chennamma and Rani Veeramma of the Keladi dynasty; and Belwadi Mallamma of the Sonde dynasty of the Belgaum district. But rarely are historical records available to show their bravery and battles. Of these brave women, Belwadi Mallamma has a significant place, as she fought a battle against the Maratha Emperor, Chhatrapati Shivaji.

Belawadi Mallamma was a 17th-century queen associated with the small principality of Belawadi (Belavadi) in the present-day Belagavi district of Karnataka. She is remembered in Karnataka for her resistance to the forces of Chhatrapati Shivaji during his southern campaign and, especially, for taking command of Belawadi's defense after the death of her husband, Ishaprabhu Desai. The episode is supported by historical traditions and, importantly, by references to contemporary English East India Company records; however, many details of her life have been embellished in later literary and oral traditions. The traditional accounts identify Mallamma as a daughter of Madhulinga Nayaka of Sonda, a ruler whose domain covered parts of present-day Uttara Kannada and Goa. This parentage is widely repeated in modern accounts, although the exact genealogical relationship is not completely secure. The District Census Handbook for Belgaum, for example, describes Mallamma as a princess of Sonda and calls her a cousin of Madhulinga Nayaka, rather than his daughter. That discrepancy is a good reason not to present the parentage as an unquestionable fact. Stories about Mallamma's childhood portray her as unusually well-educated and trained in martial skills, including horse riding, archery, fencing, and spear throwing. One tradition, attributed to the scholar Shesho Srinivas Muthalik, says that she and her brother Sadashiva Nayaka received instruction in Kannada, Marathi, Urdu, and Sanskrit, along with traditional learning. However, the surviving evidence for these details comes principally from later literary material rather than independently corroborated contemporary records.

Belawadi was a small princely kingdom. Its territory was spread over parts of today's Belagavi and Dharwad districts. The early Kannada work Tharaturi Panchamara Itihasa by Shivabasava Shastri traces the history of this principality to 1511, when its first ruler, Chandrashekhara Raja, started out as a vassal of the Vijayanagara Empire. After the fall of Vijayanagara, it became an independent principality. By the 17th century, it prospered under the rule of Ishaprabhu Desai and his consort Mallamma, who competently assisted him. Queen Mallamma, who is still revered for her bravery, was the daughter of Madhulinga Nayaka, the ruler of the Sonde kingdom, which had its sway over today's Uttara Kannada district and South Goa. This was given the turbulent political situation of those days; every other kingdom had to keep its gunpowder dry. The need of the hour was such that, when the menfolk went to battle, the women had to be ready as the second line of defense. Hence, both boys and girls of the royal families were trained in the fine arts as well as in warfare. This is the reason why we see most of the legendary women warriors emerging on the scene during this span of time. The Sonde king arranged for the training of Mallamma along with her brothers under an eminent teacher, Shankar Bhatt. Young Mallamma proved her mettle. She was good at horse riding, javelin throw, fencing, and archery.

Queen Mallamma Made the Belawadi as Royal Household:

Queen Mallamma married Ishaprabhu (also rendered Ishwaraprabhu or Ishwar Prabhu) Desai, the ruler or chief of Belawadi. The Belawadi principality was a relatively small state in what is now northern Karnataka. The Government of India's District Census Handbook confirms the association of Mallamma with Ishaprabhu and records the tradition that he was killed in an encounter with the Marathas and that Mallamma subsequently defended the fort. A popular story says that Mallamma's marriage resulted from a Swayamvara in which Ishaprabhu won a tiger-hunting contest. This is an attractive part of the traditional biography, but it should be treated as legend rather than established History. In the time Queen Mallamma, she made it to the Belawadi royal household, she was well versed in both matters of administration and military skill. Upon Mallamma attaining marriageable age, her father arranged for a Swayamvara (the ritual of girl choosing the husband rather than the other way round). The aspiring groom had to prove his masculinity by hunting the number of tigers equal to his age plus one, within one month. Ishaprabhu, the 20-year-old prince of Belawadi met this challenge by hunting down 21 tigers within the stipulated time to take Mallamma as his bride. Ishaprabhu was a competent and benevolent ruler. He was supportive of Mallamma's partaking in statecraft. Apart from rubbing shoulders with her husband in administration, Mallamma also trained the womenfolk in the martial arts and raised a 5,000 strong army of women, a rare feat during those days. The kingdom was prosperous under their rule. This was also the time when Shivaji was being hailed as the

icon of Hindu revivalism, after crowning himself as a political sovereign braving the mighty Mughals and the Adil Shahis. After consolidating his position in the Deccan, Shivaji set out on the southern anabasis in 1676 by raiding the enemy territories of Khandesh, Ponda, Karwar, Kolhapur and Athani. In Hyderabad, he concluded a treaty with Qutubshah of the Golkonda Sultanate wherein the latter agreed to retract his alliance with Bijapur and jointly oppose the Mughals. Then he moved towards Tamil Nadu and captured the Vellore and Gingi forts. After settling the matter of the Tanjavur jagir, which was ruled by his half-brother Venkoji in November 1677, Shivaji began the return journey. Crossing the River Tungabhadra in January 1678, and passing through Koppal and Gadag, he reached Lakshmeshwar. The local principalities submitted to Shivaji without any resistance. Mid-January of 1678, Shivaji's forces decided to take rest and camped at Yadwad village, thereby setting the stage for future events.

Queen Mallamma Command an Army with Thousands of Women:

This is where caution is especially necessary. For Modern popular accounts frequently state that Mallamma commanded 2,000 women soldiers and 3,000 female bodyguards, and sometimes describe her as the first woman in India to establish a women's army. These numbers are widely repeated, including in modern accounts, but I could not find sufficiently strong primary evidence to treat them as established historical facts. It is therefore safer to say, Mallamma is traditionally remembered as having led women in the defence of Belawadi, but the precise size and composition of her forces are uncertain. Likewise, calling her "the first woman in Indian history to raise a women's army" is a modern commemorative claim rather than a demonstrable historical conclusion.

Conflicts with Chhatrapati Shivaji Forces:

The best-attested episode in Mallamma's life occurred in 1678, during the return phase of Shivaji's southern expedition. After his campaigns in the south, Shivaji's forces travelled through northern Karnataka. Accounts place his troops in the vicinity of Yadwad or Belawadi. A dispute involving Maratha soldiers and local cattle or milk supplies reportedly developed into armed conflict between the Maratha forces and Belawadi. The precise circumstances differ between sources, so the dramatic version in which soldiers simply "stole cattle" should be presented as the traditional explanation for the conflict, rather than as an independently established fact. The important historical point is that Belawadi resisted Shivaji's forces. Ishaprabhu led the initial defence. During the fighting he was killed. Later accounts describe his death as resulting from a Maratha soldier stabbing him from behind, but the precise manner of his death cannot be established with the same confidence as the broader fact that he died during the conflict. After Ishaprabhu's death, Mallamma assumed responsibility for the defence of Belawadi. This is the central achievement for which she is remembered. Rather than surrendering immediately, she continued the resistance and commanded the defence of the fort. Later accounts describe a 27-day defence against Shivaji's forces. This detail has stronger historical support than many of the colourful stories surrounding the episode. Historian Jadunath Sarkar, in *Shivaji and His Times*, referred to the defender as Savitri Bai of Belawadi and recorded that the fort resisted for 27 days before being taken and the queen captured. More significantly, an English East India Company report from Rajapur dated 28th February 1678 described Shivaji as besieging a fort where, according to reports from his own men, he had suffered unusually serious embarrassment in trying to overcome the woman known as the Desai. This contemporary foreign report is particularly important because it shows that the story of a woman offering unusually strong resistance to Shivaji's army was not simply a much later Kannada folk invention.

Queen Mallamma along with her women fighters led a surgical strike, leaving 200 Maratha soldiers wounded and 12 killed within an hour and released the livestock. When the news reached Shivaji, he was furious with the unbecoming conduct of his soldiers and reprimanded them. However, he was equally disturbed over the women soldiers beating his men. To redeem his lost prestige, he ordered his general Dadaji to march against Belawadi. The Maratha army was met with fierce resistance by the Belawadi force under Ishaprabhu. The battle

raged for 15 days. Meanwhile, the Belawadi fort ran out of provisions, forcing Ishaprabhu to launch a direct attack. In the ensuing battle, a Maratha soldier stabbed Ishaprabhu from behind. He fell from the horse and died on the battlefield. When this shocking news reached Mallamma, she was in confinement as her child was a mere four months old. Yet she was not deterred; she continued the fight. Under her spirited leadership, the Belawadi forces defended the fort for 27 more days. The ballads of her heroism in the battlefield are sung even today. Eminent historian Jadunath Sarkar in his work 'Shivaji and His Times' refers to the queen as Savitri Bai of Belawadi and writes: "Her fort was at once besieged but she defended it for 27 days, after which it was carried by assault and she herself was captured." This long check by a woman before a petty mud fort greatly lowered Shivaji's prestige. The English Factory Records of Rajapur dated February 28, 1678 reads: "He is at present besieging a fort where, by relation of their own people come from him, he has suffered more disgrace than even he did from all powers of the Mughal or the Deccan (Bijapuris) and he who hath conquered so many kingdoms is not able to reduce this woman Desai of Belwadi.

When the Marathas found it a daunting task to nab Mallamma, they hatched a plot to bring an end to the battle by deceit. On that particular day too, Mallamma held the field heroically. However, the soldiers cut off the legs of her horse, made her fall and at once captured the seriously injured queen. The soldiers further humiliated the captive queen before taking her to Shivaji. Once before Shivaji, the events took a different turn. The queen was taken aback when Shivaji, true to his legendary nature of standing for the honour of women, received her with due respect and treated her with befitting honour. In the ensuing conversation, he was dumbstruck when Mallamma boldly condemned the act of his soldiers. As per popular lore, Shivaji saw in her the vision of Jagadamba, the Goddess in the form of 'Universal Mother' and he saluted her. He expressed regret for the unpleasant happenings and duly returned her kingdom. He also punished those who humiliated her. Quoting from the Persian work Tarikh-i-Shivaji, Sarkar writes that Shivaji reprimanded and punished Sakuji Gaikwar, who was the perpetrator of the evil deed. One can hardly see a victor king punishing his own man for dishonouring a woman, who happened to be his captive. Mallamma too was moved by Shivaji's benevolence and high regard for women irrespective of their status. In commemoration of this historic event, the queen ordered for the carving of the sculpture of Shivaji Maharaj to be installed in the four corners of her kingdom. Only one survives at Yadwad today.

Capture and Meeting with Shivaji:

The sources agree that Mallamma was eventually captured after the fall of Belawadi's fort. This is supported by the account cited by Jadunath Sarkar. What happened afterward is much less certain. Popular Kannada traditions say that Shivaji admired Mallamma's courage, regretted the death of her husband, and released her. Some versions say that he returned her territory or treated her as a mother or sister. Another tradition associates a memorial at Yadwad with Shivaji's respect for Mallamma. These stories should not be presented as securely documented facts. There is a particularly important reason for caution. The later Shivaji-Mallammaji Samarotsava tradition claims that Shivaji himself sought forgiveness from Mallamma after she defeated or confronted him. Historian G. B. Mehendale and others have questioned aspects of this material, and the original manuscript is reportedly lost. The surviving version has been described as containing later interpolations. Therefore, the historically responsible formulation is: Mallamma was captured after the fall of Belawadi; later traditions hold that Shivaji respected her courage and released her, but the detailed dialogue and reconciliation story cannot be regarded as securely established.

The Sculpture:

The sculpture of Shivaji is finely carved on a black granite slab, three feet high and two and a half feet wide. The top portion is semi-circular and it is divided into two parts. The upper half shows Shivaji Maharaj riding a horse. He is dressed in typical Maratha attire of long coat with waistband and head dress. He is also shown holding a sword in his right hand and a shield in the left. He is flanked by attendants who too are in typical Maratha costume, and holding in their hands, insignias of royalty like umbrellas and staff. There is also a dog walking along with him.

On the bottom panel, Shivaji is shown holding a bowl in his hands and feeding milk to Mallamma's infant baby who is seen sitting on his lap. Mallamma is seen standing nearby, holding bow and arrow and wearing her sari tightly in the 'Veerakache' style. A few inscriptions in Kannada are found at the top of this panel but they are illegible. As times change and history turns its pages, many things get lost. Same is the case with Mallamma. Today Belawadi is a sleepy village with no traces of its ancient forts and palaces. The temple of Sri Veerabhadreshwara, the family deity of the Belawadi royals, is the only surviving old structure of yore. Just ask about Mallamma, and people will guide you to Yadwad. Thus, this rare sculpture commemorates at once the bravery of Mallamma and chivalrous attitude of Shivaji.

Queen Mallmmas Legacy:

Queen Mallamma Traditional biographies commonly give Mallamma's dates as 1624–1678. However, these dates should also be treated cautiously. The sources I found establish her place in the 1678 conflict much more firmly than they establish precise birth and death dates. In other words, "1624–1678" is the commonly circulated chronology, not a chronology that should be presented as beyond dispute. The queen died in 1678, leaving behind a legacy of bravery and resilience. Belawadi Mallamma is sometimes referred to as the "First Queen in History to raise Women Army" and is regarded as a precursor to other women warriors such as Kittur Rani Chennamma. She is remembered in Karnataka for her bravery, and her story is preserved through folk traditions and cultural programs. Belawadi, once a hub of activity and royal heritage, has faded into a quiet village with no visible remnants of its ancient forts or palaces. The only surviving relic is the temple of Sri Veerabhadreshwara, the Kuladevata of the Belawadi royals. Those curious about Mallamma are often directed to Yadwad, where rare sculptures are preserved.

Conclusion and Findings:

Queen Belawadi Mallamma is historically recognized as a heroic 17th-century warrior queen from Karnataka who successfully led an all-women military force and defended her kingdom against Maratha expansion. **Early Military Training:** Born in 1624 in Sode, Mallamma trained in archery, fencing, and horse riding alongside her male peers. **Origin of Conflict:** The battle began after Maratha troops plundered cattle from a village in Bewails and Resistance. Her husband, King Ishaprabhu, was killed during the 15-day conflict. Mallamma then took command. **Women's Regiment.** She led a dedicated force of thousands of female soldiers in combat. **Chivalric Resolution.** Impressed by her extreme valour and leadership, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj treated her with high respect, asked for forgiveness for his soldiers' actions, and restored her kingdom. Would you like to know more about the tactics of her women's army or the recent historical discoveries related to her period?

Belawadi Mallamma's life has been commemorated in art, literature, and oral traditions. Statues and memorials in Karnataka honour her contributions, and she remains a symbol of regional pride. A finely carved black granite slab, three feet high and two and a half feet wide, holds a unique sculpture that narrates a compelling story of bravery and compassion. The top of the slab is semicircular, divided into two sections. The upper section portrays Shivaji Maharaj astride a horse, dressed in traditional Maratha attire a long coat with a waistband a distinct headgear. In his right hand, he wields a sword, while his left holds a shield. Attendants in Maratha costume accompany him, carrying royal insignias such as umbrellas and staffs. A dog is also depicted walking alongside the group, adding a touch of realism to the scene. The bottom panel offers a more intimate depiction. Shivaji is shown holding a bowl and feeding milk to Mallamma's infant child, who sits on his lap. Mallamma, standing nearby, is portrayed with a bow and arrow, her sari tightly draped in the Kannadiga 'Veerakache' style, symbolizing her readiness for combat. The panel includes inscriptions in Kannada at the top, though they are now illegible. The Kannadigas were high-spirited souls of courage and energy. They valued freedom more than their lives and would not reconcile themselves to a life of humiliation. Thus, Karnataka history is full of thrilling stories of the exemplary

sacrifices of brave women. High ideals inspired them to dedicate their lives to the service of the people. Many achieved distinctions in literary, social and spiritual fields, and their achievements in administration and war constitute a proud heritage of Karnataka. It is noted that not only men, but also women have also played a significant role in retaining their freedom by fighting against their enemies. The women of Karnataka have played significant role in freedom movement, even before the British to protect their kingdoms and territories. These women were from the royal families of rulers. Almost of them were queens and fought the battle so as to protect their motherland. Few of such queen brave warriors include Rani Chennamma of Kittur in Belgaum district, Abbakka, Queen of Ullal Kingdom of South Kanara, Rani Chennamma and Rani Veeramma of Keladi dynasty and Belwadi Mallamma of Swadi dynasty of Belgaum district. But rarely historical records are available to show their bravery and battles. Of these brave women, Belwadi Mallamma has significant place as she fought battle against Maratha Emperor, Chhatrapati Shivaji. After this Mallamma became legendary Queen of Karnataka.

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