

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment: A Women Regiment for Indian Freedom

Dr. Harkirat Singh

Associate Professor, Head, Department of History, Public College, Samana (Punjab) (India)

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*Corresponding Author

Email: 73sidhu@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Indian freedom struggle was a mass-based struggle that encompassed various sections of society- both men as well women at the time. The heritage of the Indian women nationalists, who fought for India's freedom from South-East Asia, remains an inseparable part of Indian nationalism. With this view that Indian women could help their brothers in various ways, the women section was started and the response from Indian women to taking active role in the movement was encouraging. This encouraged the Subhas Chandra Bose to establish the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army with volunteers from expatriate Indian population in South East Asia. This Regiment showed indomitable courage in the famous battle of Impal on the Indian border.

Indian women had played a key role in political, economic and social revolution in India. Their courage and dedication was unsung in Indian history. Women launched movements and struggled for India's independence. Throughout the history of India at different stages Indian women had shown their capacities in the freedom struggle. Their activities ranged from Mahatama Gandhi's Non-violence to Subhas Chandra Bose's revolutionary violence. Till the advent of Subhas Chandra Bose in South-East Asia, the idea of women taking any active part in the Indian independence movement was dismissed as quite impracticable and impossible. Indian women, labouring as they had been for centuries under age-worn customs, traditions and superstitions, were regarded as incapable of playing any part in such an important, vital and far-reaching political and military struggle. Prior to the outbreak of war in South-East Asia, even the majority Indian men in South-East Asia were politically very backward. Although it was practically overnight that these very men changed from being mere bread-winners and beast of burden into politically-conscious men, ready to do their bit for the winning of their country's freedom. This political consciousness also awakened the Indian women. Rash Behari Bose realized that women could play crucial role in the coming struggle for freedom. Therefore when he reorganized the movement early in 1943, after the crisis in the Indian National Army (INA) and the Council of Action he stressed the need for women joining the movement. He, however, only visualized women as playing the role of nurses in the INA hospital and also doing relief work among the sick and the destitute. The women very readily responded to it. But this could become reality when the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was formed by Subhas Chandra Bose to fight for India's independence.

In this paper attempt has been made to explore the history of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, a part of the Indian National Army that was raised and led by entirely by local Indian women in South East Asia. This paper is a conscientious contribution towards the debate on the INA and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment's role and gives a better understanding of its contribution to India's independence struggle. To write the paper the primary sources i.e. INA Files, IIL Papers, Contemporary Newspapers etc. extensively used.

The arrival of Subhas Chandra Bose in Japan was an epoch-making event. With the arrival of Subhas Chandra Bose in South-East Asia, the Indian independence movement was consolidated and it electrified the entire Greater East Asia and infused a new hope and greater enthusiasm in the sponsors of the Indian independence movement and the entire Indian community in East Asia. The presence of Subhas Chandra Bose was significant as he reinvigorated the movement in South-East Asia for Indian independence, gave it for first time a definite plan to achieve its aim, speedily fulfilled the requirement to bring the army into action and established the relations between Japanese and the leaders of the movement on the basis of equality. In 1943 Subhas Chandra Bose took over the command of the Indian National Army and Presidentship of the Indian Independence League, which enabled Subhas Chandra Bose to form the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (*Arzi Hukumate-e-Azad Hind*) in Singapore in 1943.

Ever since the formation of the Indian Independence League, it was felt that Indian women, in East Asia could also do lot of further for the cause of India's Independence. It was such a great task that every man and every woman was required to come forward to sacrifice his or her utmost for this cause. Indian women could help their brothers in various ways i.e. preparation and collection of bandages, first field dressings and other requirements, collection of funds and articles required for the troops and to inspire young men and women to do their duty in their critical hour etc.

It was with this view that Indian women began to take part in the movement. In March 1943, a Women's section of IIL was formally inaugurated. All the branches of the IIL throughout Malaya, Thailand and Burma started women's section.¹ But it was with the arrival of Subhas Chandra Bose that movement underwent a revolutionary change and gathered a fresh momentum. Subhas Chandra Bose asked for men as well as women volunteers. He felt that women must be ready to share the burden, of freedom's battle, "This caught the imagination of the Indian women folk" and a beginning to start a women's Regiment was made, which later popularly came to be known as the "Rani Jhansi Regiment".² Since the creation of Women's

Department the response from Indian women to taking active role in the movement was encouraging. Number of women offered for enlistment in Singapore.³

On October 22, 1943, Indians gathered, to celebrate the Birthday of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi in Singapore. The entire audience composed mostly of women, young and old, rose to its feet and broke out into delirious cheering when Subhas Chandra Bose called upon the Indian women to march shoulder to shoulder with their brothers of the *Azad Hind Fauj* and be ready to lay down their lives on the battlefield for the sake of India's freedom.⁴ On that day Rani of Jhansi Regiment was officially opened, a Regiment composed entirely of women to be trained as combatants and when the opportunity came to go forth into the field of battle as did as noble Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi, in India's First War of Independence in 1857. When he spoke to raise a women regiment, "there was absolute silence and there were looks of complete disbelief on the faces of all present".⁵ He realized that when the chance was given to women, they would come forward readily agar to share the border and to fight shoulder to shoulder with their brothers, husbands, sons and fathers for the freedom of their mother land. Thus it was that S C Bose's dream becomes a reality. Young Indian women from all parts of East Asia besieged the recruitment centers and volunteered for the services in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Often they came in the face of stiff parental and family opposition. But since the Leader himself had sponsored this idea, public opinion which had hitherto been against women's participation so actively in the struggle, changed, as the faith in the Leader was great and so complete. Subhas Chandra Bose inspected the guard of honour presented by an armed unit of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, in the company of Capt. Mrs. Lakshmi. On the same day he formally opened the training camp for the Regiment, and put the Secretary of the League for its training.⁶ Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan was appointed the first Commandant of the Regiment. Dr. Lakshmi was to command not only the women's Regiment at headquarters, but also the women's section of the League and the Women's Department of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind cabinet. For S.C. Bose, Dr. Lakshmi was the key to the recruitment of women in both civilian and military capacities.

There was obstructive attitude of the Japanese to establish the Women's Regiment. To them this idea of a Women's Regiment was something quite unimaginable and they could not realize for quite some time that Subhas Chandra Bose was serious to form the Regiment. They were quite prepared to see women nurses work in hospital. In their rear headquarters they often employed women clerks and stenographers. But the formation of Women's Regiment was against their entire military traditions. They, therefore, created all kinds of obstacles in the way of attaining suitable camp sites and training grounds. Subhas Chandra Bose took up the matter with the high military authorities on the spot and was even prepared to go to further lengths. This ultimately convinced the Japanese and they agreed.

In Singapore, Subhas Chandra Bose opened the Training Camp and he was on that day provided with a guard of honour consisting of young women smartly clad in khaki uniforms. The

opening of the Training Camp of the Rani Jhansi Regiment was a land mark in the history of the Indian independence movement in South-East Asia. Women of all castes, creeds and provinces of India joined up. There were Tamils, Telgus, Sikhs, Bangalees, Muslims, Christians and Gurkhas. The majority of the volunteers in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment were from south India. When Subhas Chandra Bose visited Shangahi remarkable enthusiasm was shown. Not only did men enlist as volunteers, but nearly 150 women volunteered for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. They were given training in nursing, social service and general welfare works. The military part of the training consisted of drill, weapon training, tactics, map reading and general subjects. They were trained to use rifles, bayonets, sub-machine guns, machine guns, revolvers, grenades, swords, and daggers.⁷ Later when the training of the first batch was completed, they were absorbed into the INA as one of its units and came under the direct control of the Supreme Headquarters of the INA and pledged to the same cause, viz. the achievement of the complete Independence of India. The strength of the Regiment was about two thousand.⁸

On the completion of four months' military training the first passing out parade of Rani of Jhansi Regiment was held in Singapore on 30 March 1944. Before the final parade, the examination was held. On the practical side there was the Range practice. The first time this was done. It was a great thrill as live ammunition was being handled. The Japanese officers were too surprised to see the women soldiers' fire and their accuracy and marksmanship. Unfortunately S. C. Bose was not present at the time of final passing out parade. The Chief of Staff of the INA took the salute. All the high ranking officers of the INA and the Japanese officers and the public of Singapore were present and were thrilled beyond the expectations to see the long column of Indian women march past. The eight women officers who had passed the INA officers' test were commissioned. Lakshmi stated on the day, "the proudest day of my life."⁹ It was a difficult to imagine that these stalwart, upright, brisk women were once fragile, delicate, ill nourished Indian woman who had responded to the call of S.C. Bose. After the passing out parade, these newly created women soldiers were absorbed into the INA on the same footing as their brothers and pledged to the same cause i.e. the achievement of complete independence of India

In Singapore the first detachment of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment consisted of one company. Although as regards military training everyone started from scratch, due to differences in educational qualifications, some sort of divisions into future officers, N.C.Os and sepoy, was possible and accordingly the girls were divided into sections and platoons. The majority of the volunteers consisted of the daughters, sisters and wives of petty tradesmen, estate workers, and men of the lower middle class.¹⁰ There were also a number of young women from comfortable homes. They fully realized the magnitude of the steps they were taking and determined to give their all to the service of the motherland. Among these young women who came forward with such spirit and devotion the majority had never even seen the motherland for whose liberation they were ready to lay down their lives. They were Indians, who in distant lands had been able to forget all differences of caste and creed; Indians who had been

shamefully exploited and had no redress for their grievances; and above all Indians who knew that unless the motherland was free, there was no hope of a fair deal for her nationals in abroad.

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment training camp was run on strict military lines, perfect discipline being maintained from the very start. All the work of cooking, cleaning etc. was done by the volunteers themselves. Weekly duties were assigned so that the work was shared equally by everybody. There were some elderly women who volunteered as camp cooks. At their own instance, they took part in physical training, route march etc. Some of the more enthusiastic of them even learn to handle rifles expertly.¹¹ They were prepared to move to the front and always carried rifles, as they said they did not want to be caught unawares by the enemy. The training was given by a detachment of Officers and N.C.O's who had been specially selected from crack of Infantry Regiments of the INA. From its very inception, the officers and men of the INA had cooperated in every way possible and saw it to the members of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment were given the best winning possible. To maintain the discipline there was the division into Officers, N.C.Os and Sepoys. These divisions were not so apparent, because of the spirit of comradeship and fellow-feeling that existed. It was a most unique experience that many women lived together. Not as in women's hostel where all the members were of the same social status with similarity of ideas and outlook, but for such a varied lot. There were, however, bound by a common spirit of service and self sacrifice, united by the same ideal and inspired by the same leader.

Although the Rani of Jhansi Regiment only began as a detachment, one company strong, everyday new recruits joined until there were two thousand women trained as soldiers. No doubt this was a microscopic figure, but under which conditions it was raised that was main achievement. In addition to the combatants there was also very fine Nursing Corps. These nurses were trained in the INA hospitals in Singapore and Rangoon and later sent to work in front line hospitals, where they rendered valuable service in looking after the sick and the wounded. These nurses were subjected to the same rigorous as the combatants. Often their hospitals were subjected to aerial bombardment and artillery fire.

After the training was over, the first batch of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was itching to go into action. Again, the Japanese tried to be obstructive by not providing transport

facilities. The transport was arranged and the first batch set out from Singapore with the cry of '*Chalo-Delhi*' on their lips, and the hope in their hearts that if they ever returned would be only after here motherland had achieved her independence.¹² The first stage of the journey from Malaya to Thailand was comparatively simple, although they travelled into cattle trucks. Then they started the hazardous part along with the newly constructed Thailand-Burma Railway through the dense forests and over the hills of the Thai- Burma Frontier. Once in Burma, the next step was to go to the front and to come to grips with the enemy.

The INA which went into action on Indo-Burma border, full of hope and courage, fighting under the most desperate conditions and yet able to gain their way inch by inch, found itself up against overhauling odds. The territorial monsoon burst on them, and they clang on without food and shelter but their indomitable spirit to cherish them. Under such conditions S.C. Bose ordered the INA to treat back into Burma. The first detachment the Rani of Jhansi Regiment reached Burma. Thus there was no chance of their going to the front. Still they carried on their training, trying to increase their stamina and capacity to bear physical strain. In particular, they devoted most of their time in learning of the art of guerrilla and jungle warfare. In addition, several exceptionally spirited young women volunteered for suicide squad and special services work,¹³ hoping against hope that once more the tide of battle would turn in their favour. But that was not to be. Finally the Regiment reached Thailand and from there proceeded back to Singapore. S.C. Bose left Malaya on his last trip and he gave the order that the Rani of Jhansi Regiment be disbanded and the members be allowed to return to their own homes. This order they obeyed most reluctantly as they would have preferred by far to be taken as prisoners of war along with their brothers of the INA.

Thus S.C. Bose created the Rani of Jhansi Regiment as a part of the Indian National Army to achieve the Indian Independence. The Indian women responded enthusiastically to S.C. Bose's Call to fight for liberation of India. They wore the burden of national struggle for freedom along with the men. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment created a new spirit into the hearts of the women and created the harmony. The whole nation felt proud by the fact that the Regiment commanded by Indian women. This had greatly boosted the morale of the nationalists and shaken the foundations of the British colonial system.

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