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Rani In Arms: Women, Militarized Agency And The Indian National Army In The 1940s

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Abstract: This study examines the development of militant femininity within Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) during the 1940s. It explores how Bose's concept of total mobilization transformed women's roles in India's anti-colonial movement by incorporating them as disciplined fighters through the formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in 1943. Drawing on archival intelligence reports, INA propaganda, Azad Hind Radio broadcasts, and memoirs such as Captain Lakshmi Sahgal's, the research demonstrates how militarization functioned as both a tactical and symbolic strategy, challenging colonial perceptions of women as passive and the limitations imposed by prevailing patriarchal norms. By analyzing Bose's speeches and INA training manuals, the study details women's recruitment, training, and command structures, situating them within broader transnational networks across Southeast Asia. The findings reveal that the regiment intertwined the ideals of Shakti with modern militarism, turning the female body into a symbol of ideological resistance and reshaping nationalism, gender, and political agency in late-colonial India.

Keywords- Indian National Army (INA), Subhas Chandra Bose, Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Militant Femininity, Total Mobilization, Gender and Nationalism, Women Empowerment, Feminist Historiography, Anti-Colonial Resistance, Indian Freedom Movement.

INTRODUCTION

The 1940s marked a pivotal transformation in India's nationalist movement, as Subhas Chandra Bose emerged with a bold, militarized vision of independence. Amidst the global upheaval of the Second World War and growing dissatisfaction with constitutional and Gandhian methods, Bose championed liberation through total mobilization—a strategy combining political radicalism, international alliances, and a reimagining of gender roles. The creation of the Indian National Army (INA) and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) was not merely a military venture; it represented a revolutionary conception of womanhood within nationalist politics. Traditional nationalist narratives, as noted by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1993) and Tanika Sarkar (2001), often confined women to the “inner domain” of morality and spirituality, rendering their involvement largely symbolic rather than structural. Gandhi's moral vision, while seemingly inclusive, primarily depicted women as guardians of purity and self-sacrifice. In contrast, Bose broke decisively from this model, presenting women as fighters and leaders capable of embodying both political and military strength. By invoking **Shakti**, the divine feminine power, he linked ancient paradigms of valour with contemporary nationalist action, providing a culturally resonant framework for women's active engagement in the military.

The formation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in 1943, under Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan (later Sahgal), was a landmark experiment in gendered resistance. Drawing recruits from Indian expatriate communities in Southeast Asia, the regiment functioned as both a military unit and a propaganda instrument, symbolizing empowered Indian womanhood in direct opposition to colonial and patriarchal narratives. British intelligence reports described its members as “astonishingly disciplined,” highlighting the INA's capacity to combine

ideological commitment with military effectiveness (Thapar-Björkert, 2006). This study examines the mobilization of women in the INA within the broader contexts of global warfare, decolonization, and feminist historiography. Through archival records, public speeches, and contemporary writings, it argues that Bose's vision of total mobilization extended beyond military strategy: it fundamentally redefined the gendered language of nationalism. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment thus emerges as a site where the boundaries between femininity and militancy, morality and modernity, domesticity and political engagement were continually negotiated and reshaped.

WOMEN IN THE INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY: MILITANT NATIONALISM AND GENDERED RESISTANCE

The 1940s saw a radical but frequently overlooked remapping of gender, militarism, and nationalism around the axis of India's quest for independence, as in the recruitment of women by Subhas Chandra Bose into the Indian National Army (INA) and the creation of the Rani Jhansi Regiment (RJR), an unparalleled experiment in militarized womanhood that fundamentally overturned the colonial and patriarchal clichés of the period. While earlier historiography was wont to restrict the role of the woman in nationalism to Gandhian models of moral protest and passive resistance, the female contingent of the INA represented an alternate trajectory—an trajectory of assertiveness, armed action, and flaunting, thus fusing myth, politics, and military courage. This process must be located in the historiographic course of the geopolitical disruptions wrought by the Second World War and the larger intellectual evolution of anti-colonial nationalism, as it entered, in the latter years of the 1930s, beyond the moralistic imperatives of Gandhian non-violence, into more overtly aggressive and militaristic realms. Bose's ideological divergence from mainstream Congress was neither accidental nor calculating but was derived from a faith that freedom is indissolubly tied to disciplined sacrifice and all-encompassing mobilization, a reading that saw women as more than auxiliary entrants but as active instruments of radical revolution. As Bose declared in a broadcast in 1943 from Azad Hind Radio, "Freedom is not given it is taken by force." This assertion redefined patrimony as a lived, militarized ethic, thus creating an unparalleled world of public agency for Indian women. The genesis of the INA in Southeast Asia must be read against the backdrop of Japan's imperial strategy and the exile of thousands of Indian soldiers captured in Malaya and Singapore after the British collapse in 1942. Bose's arrival in Singapore in July 1943 and his subsequent declaration of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind inaugurated an ambitious transnational mobilization effort. Yet what distinguished Bose's project was his insistence that women be conscripted into the national army a proposition unprecedented in modern Indian history. The Rani Jhansi Regiment, founded in July 1943 under the command of Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan (later Captain Lakshmi Sahgal), symbolized not only Bose's ideological commitment to gender inclusivity but also a deliberate invocation of the historical memory of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi, the legendary warrior-queen of 1857 whose rebellion against British rule had long been romanticized as an icon of both martyrdom and militant virtue. By naming the regiment after Jhansi's Rani, Bose strategically fused historical memory with modern militarism, transforming feminine sacrifice into revolutionary strength. The recruitment and training of women in the RJR took place primarily in Singapore, Rangoon, and Bangkok, where Bose appealed to the expatriate Indian community, particularly Tamil and Malayali women, many of whom were nurses, teachers, and workers displaced by the war. British intelligence reports from 1944 (India Office Records, L/WS/1/989) describe women undergoing rifle training, bayonet drills, and route marches in tropical heat, their uniforms—khaki tunics and berets adorned with the tricolour badge—marking a visual rupture from both domesticity and colonial servitude. The uniform symbolism itself bore a semiotic load: the khaki cloth, previously synonymous with colonial discipline, was repurposed as the hue of anti-imperial rebellion. In the INA's ideological landscape, women were no longer mere nurses or morale-builders but were, as soldiers, oathbound to the Azad Hind government and sworn to battle in the same chain of command as men. This enfranchisement was no rhetorical flourish—world-war-II propaganda postcards published by the Azad Hind Bureau in Tokyo and Bangkok promulgated time and again the refrain of "Jhansi ki Rani ki Jai" with pictures of armed women redefining the visual vocabulary of Indian nationalism. The armed status of Indian women thus became simultaneously a democratic imperative and a liberatory gesture from colonial and patriarchal domination.

In order to comprehend the radical nature of this era, it is essential to place the Rani Jhansi Regiment in relation to the broader context of Indian women's involvement in nationalist movements over the previous decades. Under the guidance of Gandhi, figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Aruna Asaf Ali emerged as prominent participants in civil disobedience initiatives; however, their engagement was still limited by the prevailing narratives of *seva* (service) and *ahimsa* (non-violence). In contrast, Bose redefined *seva* as *yuddha-seva*—service through warfare. This conceptual alteration disrupted the traditional dichotomy between masculine bravery and feminine morality that supported both colonial rule and nationalist discourse.

Mrinalini Sinha (2006) asserts in *Specters of Mother India* that colonial narratives consistently feminized India, portraying it as weak and dependent on the strength of British governance; consequently, the representation of armed Indian women directly challenged the foundational epistemology of empire. Within the Indian National Army's (INA) propaganda, the Indian female figure transformed from the "mother" of the nation to its "warrior-daughter." This reimagining had significant ramifications: it constituted not only an extension of nationalism but also a redefinition of gender roles within the nationalist framework. Bose's oratory often invoked the imagery of Shakti (divine feminine power), connecting it to contemporary concepts of discipline and sacrifice. The oath taken by the RJR—"I shall fight for the freedom of India and for the honour of my sisters"—summarized this convergence of the sacred and the martial, uniting the goddess and the soldier into a singular moral identity.

Recent oral histories collected by Ranjana Padhi and historians at the Nehru Memorial Museum reveal subtle micro-histories of RJR enlistees such as Rasammah Bhupalan and Janaky Athi Nahappan, whose accounts display an intricate dynamic of gender emancipation and nationalist duty. Rasammah, for instance, related that her decision to join the INA was originally inspired by admiration of Bose's personality, but then became an intense personal realization of empowerment and courage—a pattern repeated in many of the women's autobiographies. These accounts question overly simplistic accounts of the INA as being a mere tool of Bose's political ambition; rather, they suggest an interactive process by which women seized on nationalist discourse in order to create new identities for themselves. Thapar-Björkert (2006) argues that the military mobilization of women in the INA represented a double offense—against British colonial hierarchies, and against Indian patriarchal values that relegated women to the domestic sphere. Conversely, this empowerment was also limited by structural imperatives of warfare. Despite the discourse of equality, women in the INA were often impeded in frontline deployment, a reflection of both practical issues and ideological equivocation. Captain Lakshmi herself conceded in later interviews that while the RJR did receive combat training, it was not engaged on the frontline of battle due to changing wartime conditions from the end of the Asian campaign in 1944. Nevertheless, the symbolic value of armed Indian females—parading, saluting, and pledging their allegiance to an independent India—spawned a lasting impression on public consciousness, both in India and in the world anti-imperialist campaigns of the 1940s. The Azad Hind Radio broadcasts from Rangoon and Tokyo, with frequent contributions from females, further solidified the representation of females as active participants in the freedom campaign, freeing them from the colonial stereotype of the defeated Indian woman.

The militarization of femininity, however, was fraught with contradictions. Feminist scholars, including Tanika Sarkar (2001) and Partha Chatterjee (1993), have noted that the nationalist movement's incorporation of women frequently perpetuated the very patriarchal assumptions it aimed to overcome. For instance, the Indian National Army's (INA) appeal to motherhood and sacrifice had the potential to reaffirm women's roles within the moral frameworks of chastity and honor, even as it endeavored to empower them in a military context. Bose's discourse surrounding "total mobilization" amalgamated modern militaristic ideals with indigenous spiritual beliefs, resulting in a gender ideology that embodied both progressive and conservative elements. The RJR was celebrated as an emblem of Bharat Mata's awakening—an influential yet essentialized representation of femininity. This dichotomy is manifest in contemporary press coverage from *Free India* (the INA's official publication), which exalted the regiment's bravery but seldom addressed their political agency beyond Bose's guidance. Nevertheless, dismissing the RJR as mere propaganda would neglect its significant intervention in the historical narrative concerning women's public roles. The existence of the regiment itself contested the British colonial policy that marginalized Indian women from combatant recognition and illustrated the possibilities of a gender-inclusive nationalism. Furthermore, the INA's vision extended beyond its direct military implications. The concept of armed female patriotism left a lasting imprint on postwar cultural memory, as films, literature, and oral traditions continued to celebrate the image of the woman soldier as a revolutionary symbol. The INA's defeat in 1945 did not obliterate its ideological triumph; rather, the ensuing public trials of its officers at the Red Fort invigorated nationwide support, consolidating various political factions under the common cause of anti-colonial solidarity. The role of women in the INA thus became a moral impetus for the wider independence movement, forcing British authorities and Indian elites alike to consider the reimagined sense of national identity.

The postwar fates of the Rani Jhansi Regiment women shed light on the complex afterlives of militarized womanhood in both nationalist historiography and social remembrance, unpacking the ways in which their involvement in the INA swung between valorization, forgetting, and selective remembrance based on shifting contexts of politics, gender regimes, and regional archival preservation; archival letters from families in Tamil

Nadu and Kerala, preserved in personal repositories, illustrate the subtle negotiations that enabled recruitment, in which young women were often required to obtain consent from fathers or male patrons but exercised agency in convincing seniors by mobilizing patriotic duty and Bose's vision, as if recruitment was as much a domestic brokerage as a politicized mobilization (Navarednam, 2007; Singapore National Archives Oral History, 1943–45), while British intelligence surveillance reports indicate the ways in which authorities saw military involvement among women as a psychological threat capable of inducing insubordination among Indian troops, generating a double perception of the RJR as being simultaneously a symbolic and practical tool of rebellion (Burton, 1998; India Office Records, L/WS/1/989); close analysis of training routines reveals that recruits were put through intense military preparation, including shooting, country walks, tactical training, and ideological education, complemented by regimental-special education lectures on Rani Lakshmi Bai's 1857 rebellion, nationalist verse, and citizens' duty, evincing a deliberate combination of historical remembrance, moral formation, and practical military competence (Thapar-Björkert, 2006; BiblioAsia, 2018), while micro-case studies, such as Rasammah Bhupalan and Janaky Athi Nahappan, open up the embodied experience of discipline, hardiness, and solidarity that engendered an affect community of female patriots whose identities were formed through the simultaneous imperatives of national duty, feminine performance, and personal ambition; the structural hierarchical of the RJR, with senior more educated or more privileged women being assigned supervisory positions but labour-intensive training and camp duty being relegated to younger plantation-origin troops, highlights the ways in which social stratification crossed with militarization, generating dissonance between the egalitarian discourse of the INA and the practical experience of female soldiers (Rettig, 2013; Singapore National Archives), while camp medic reports, letters, and camp rules illustrate the regiment's practical handling of issues such as illness, pregnancy, and vulnerability, revealing a delicate balancing of institutional discipline with humane supervision, with formal repatriation procedures and secrecy rules governing both contemporaneous wartime practice and deep-time historical remembrance (Lakshmi Sahgal Papers; Singapore oral histories); the symbolic potential of women in uniforms, amplified by Azad Hind Radio broadcasts and by INA leaflet propaganda, generated a transnational prominence for feminine participation that disrupted colonial representations of passive womanhood, documenting that militarized agency was not exclusively performances but culture-relevant, inspiring both the Indian diaspora as well as domestic audiences to rethink the feminine as capable of direct action, strategy, and sacrifice (Sahgal, 1997; BiblioAsia, 2018); postwar, the INA trials at the Red Fort in Delhi (1945–46) was a national spectacle, with testimony from women such as Captain Lakshmi Sahgal highlighting their devotion to the nationalist cause, generating public sentiment that cut through regional, linguistic, and communal divisions, illustrating the potential of women's militarized involvement to influence politicized mobilization and public opinion as much as the regiment's practical contribution remained negligible (Thapar-Björkert, 2006; Chatterjee, 1993).

From a historiographical standpoint, the RJR challenges both nationalist and feminist paradigms: while early histories following Independence often marginalized female combatants in favour of Gandhian models of passive heroism, contemporary archival investigations illuminate the complexity of the regiment, uncovering the intricate relationships among gender, class, caste, and diasporic experiences in influencing the internal dynamics of the INA (Sinha, 2006; Sarkar, 2001); detailed analyses of recruitment records, correspondence, and oral testimonies reveal how women maneuvered through intersecting pressures related to familial expectations, colonial oversight, and martial discipline, resulting in a hybrid identity that was at once obedient, rebellious, strategic, and emotionally invested in the nationalist cause, a phenomenon that challenges reductive binaries of empowerment versus instrumentalization (Rettig, 2013; Navarednam, 2007); furthermore, the legacy of the RJR indicates that militarized femininity was not merely performative but had significant material consequences: despite the absence of extensive combat engagement, the involvement of women in the INA exerted both political and psychological influence over British officials and Indian audiences, highlighting the latent potential for armed agency and challenging persistent beliefs about gendered capabilities in the public sphere (Burton, 1998; Thapar-Björkert, 2006). Following Independence, the integration of RJR veterans into civic, political, and diasporic domains further exemplifies the adaptable paths taken by militarized women, as evidenced by Captain Lakshmi Sahgal's parliamentary and social contributions, Rasammah Bhupalan's activism in Malaya, and the efforts of other less-documented individuals in regional welfare initiatives, which demonstrate how wartime agency translated into lasting societal impacts, albeit moderated by gendered expectations and selective remembrance (Sahgal, 1997; Singapore National Archives). The Rani Jhansi Regiment elicits critical reflection about methodological demands: the rebuilding of these narratives requires the triangulation of oral histories, personal letters, archival recruitment registers, propaganda, and colonial intelligence reports, each with unique omissions and biases, in order to reconstruct a micro-social history that foregrounds women's agency while framing it in terms of operational, ideological, and cultural constraints

(Rettig, 2013; BiblioAsia, 2018; Thapar-Björkert, 2006); such an analysis at the micro-level illuminates not only the organizational and operating complexity of the INA but also the subtle dynamics in terms of which gendered authority, upward mobility, and nationalist performance commingled, providing insights frequently effaced by large-scale politics of national independence; in short, the Rani Jhansi Regiment enacts the various modes through which Indian women exercised agency in the Independence Movement: their militarization, symbolic representation, and intensive training represented a challenge to colonial and patriarchal hierarchies as well as a redefinition of national service, such that we may recognize that these were not auxiliary but rather central builders of revolutionary mobilization; the inclusive archival, oral, and biographical data trace a span of involvement from recruitment and training through propaganda and postwar remembrance, revealing a spectrum of motivations, social negotiations, and personal transformations that foreground the RJR's significance as a contemporaneous entity as well as a conceptual template for studying the intersections of gender, militarism, and nationalism, thus forging the regiment as a significant site for advanced research in Indian historiography, feminist inquiry, and decolonization thought, while also highlighting the need for continued archival inquiry, prosopography redrawing, and multidisciplinary analysis in order to fully understand the roles and legacies of these women in the wider history of India's search for independence.

CONCLUSION

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) represents a seminal intervention in the intertwined histories of gender, nationalism, and militarism in late-colonial India. By positioning women as active combatants rather than symbolic participants, Subhas Chandra Bose challenged entrenched colonial and indigenous patriarchal frameworks, transforming the female body into both a tactical and ideological instrument of resistance. While operational constraints limited the regiment's frontline engagement, its symbolic and propagandistic resonance extended far beyond immediate military outcomes, reshaping public perceptions of female agency within nationalist discourse.

The regiment's integration of **Shakti** with disciplined military training exemplifies how cultural motifs were mobilized to legitimize women's participation in radical politics, merging traditional notions of feminine power with modern revolutionary praxis. Archival evidence, oral histories, and memoirs reveal that these women negotiated complex social hierarchies, familial expectations, and institutional discipline, producing hybrid identities that were simultaneously obedient, rebellious, and politically assertive. The RJR thus functions as a microcosm for examining the dynamic interplay between ideology, embodiment, and state formation, demonstrating that militarized femininity was not merely performative but materially and culturally consequential.

Beyond its immediate historical context, the legacy of the RJR underscores the transformative potential of women's agency in nationalist struggles, offering critical insights for contemporary feminist historiography, transnational studies of decolonization, and the study of gendered political mobilization. By foregrounding women as central actors in the INA's revolutionary project, this study affirms that militancy and nationalism were co-constitutive, and that understanding Indian independence requires sustained attention to the gendered dimensions of public and political life.

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