

Beyond the Battlefield: The Role of Women in Indian National Army Protests (1942-1946)

Anuradha Pal

Ph.D. Research Scholar of History, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India

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Professor Khagendra Nath Sethi

Professor of History, Sambalpur University, Odisha, India

Abstract: *The Indian National Army trials in 1945 marked a pivotal moment in India's struggle for independence, as the British authorities attempted to crush the spirit of the Indian National Army. However, the trials had the opposite effect, sparking a nationwide uprising that saw women from diverse backgrounds and regions emerge as powerful voices in support of the Indian National Army. Women played a crucial role in mobilizing support, rallying their communities, and fueling the struggle for independence. This essay delves into the significant contributions of women in galvanizing support for the Indian National Army, exploring their leadership, activism, and sacrifices that helped shape India's freedom movement. By examining the role of women during the Indian National Army trials, this paper gains a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics of India's struggle for independence and the critical part women played in shaping the country's destiny.*

Keywords: Women, Red Fort Trial, Indian National Army, Agitation, World War II, Rani of Jhansi Regiment, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose.

The Indian National Army Saga: The shock of British defeat in Malaya and Burma in 1942 was profound.¹ The Battle of Singapore fought on 13 February 1942 - 15 February 1942.² Following the collapse of Singapore Indian National Army was established under Capt. Mohan Singh at Alor Star, in Malaya,³ with the help of Capt. Fujiwara.⁴ After the fall of Capt. Mohan Singh, the D.M.B. - Director Military Bureau took charge until Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose arrived in July 1943 from Germany to infuse new life into Indian National Army.⁵

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment: Women who have engaged in violent activities have usually regarded as acting unnaturally.⁶ Because women's nature is

regarded as passive, women who had joined revolutionary movements and fought side-by-side with men were categorized as exceptional and labeled either positively, as goddesses, or negatively, as deviants or social rebels.⁷ Throughout the history of India, women had played a valiant role in the defense of freedom and liberty.⁸ Indian women offered to take part not only in the work of the League but were also ready to fight.⁹ Burma was closely related to India for many social, political, cultural and religious - reasons. The country had served as a battlefield of the Indian National Army with its unique women's unit called the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.¹⁰ Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose did not believe in any sort of compromise for partial independence or concessions by the ruling British Government. He vehemently advocated that total independence for India must be achieved and retained by the power and might of the Indian people originating from unity, faith and sacrifice. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose said that the total independence for India demanded total mobilization of the entire man-power including all age-groups.¹¹ That is why Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose formed a women's regiment called The Rani of Jhansi Regiment and when he formed the Provisional Government of Azad Hind, he gave its commander a seat in his cabinet.¹² On hearing the clarion call of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose the Indian women living in Burma flocked to join the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, which was started earlier in Singapore. The soldiers and officers in the Regiment were recruited from the Indian womenfolk living in Burma, most of them, specially the younger members, had not seen India but fostered a deep love for the sacred land of their forefathers. This was the only regiment which did not have a single member converted from British Indian Army. Recruited and trained under the direct influence of and inspiration from Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, the incomparable Indian leader, and headed by the then Capt. Lakshmi Swaminathan, the members of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment proudly claimed to be the pure Indian National Army. The Regiment as a whole comprised young as well as elderly women belonging to all classes and communities of the Indian society in Burma and South-east Asia with a majority of South Indians. The Women's Section of the Indian Independence League also widened its scope of work, recruiting soldiers and active workers for the movement.¹³ The recruits for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment hailing from all classes and communities of the Indian populace dwelling in South-east Asia proved remarkably fit and capable of obtaining military training. They successfully did everything that soldiers were expected to do, and justified the name of the Regiment after the glorious tradition laid by Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi. The first Commander of the Regiment Capt. Lakshmi was also of the same name in addition to her personal qualities and morale and magnetic leadership, inspired the soldiers with the spirit of 'Do or Die' for the sacred cause of Indian Independence.¹⁴ A training centre for these women was started in Malaya and later another at Rangoon.¹⁵ On 4 July, 1944 Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Commented:

*"I am glad to say that our little boys and girls have responded enthusiastically and the 'Bal Sena' that we have organized has proved to be a success. Recruits have come to us from every corner of East Asia – from China, Japan, Indo-China, Philippines, Java, Bornes, Celebes, Sumatra Malaya, Thailand and Burma."*¹⁶

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose appealed to the men to give their blood, to the women to take to the sword and to the rich to donate their wealth.¹⁷ By the time the recruits of the regiment completed the training and were ready to advance to the battlefield the entire situation of the war changed with the use of devastating Atom Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6th and 9th respectively, in 1945.¹⁸

Fall of Japan and home coming of soldiers: On August 6 and 9, 1945 Japan was bombed on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹⁹ The Emperor's radio broadcast on August 15, 1945 announcing the surrender of Japan to the Allied Powers at the Headquarters of Marshal Terauchi at Dalat, Viet-Nam.²⁰ In the meantime, Japan accepted the Postdam Declaration and surrendered. Meanwhile, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose left Saigon at 4 p.m. on the 17th August 1945. On the way they stayed at Touraine. At noon on the 18th they reached Matsuyama airport of Taihoku.²¹ 18 August 1945 was the day when he was last seen. After the end of World War II soldiers and officers of Indian National Army were captured by the British in Burma, Malaya, Vietnam, Thailand and Singapore were brought to India.²² The massive repatriation of the Indian National Army soldiers began between May and October 1945.²³ The soldiers captured in south East Asia were transported to India between May 1945 to first quarter of 1946.²⁴ After the war ended, the Government of India realized the importance of devising a clear policy towards the Indian National Army personnel. They did not take any action against the civilian recruiters of the Indian National Army from South East and East Asia.²⁵ Every Indian National Army member, regardless of whether they deserted, surrendered or were captured, underwent extensive interrogation by the British's C.S.D.I.C. – *Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre*, where they subjected to Tortured during the interrogation process.²⁶ The Indian National Army Trials began in the postwar period and they gave many Indians their first glimpse of the war-time efforts of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.²⁷ Once it became known that the Indian National Army was not Japanese "puppet army" but a full-fledged nationalist force fighting for India's independence, a unique nationalist spirit of unity appeared in all walks of life of the Indian people, and the entire country became excited.²⁸ Most of the political parties had already voiced their opposition to the Government policy during the Indian National Army trials.²⁹ The trial of Indian National Army officers has aroused keen interest throughout the country.³⁰ There was a great and genuine anxiety all over the country with regard to the fate of the men belonging to the Indian National Army who were captured in Burma.³¹ The All-

India Women's conference, the teachers and the students vehemently protested against the trial.³² Mrs. Sarojini Naidu in a statement issued on the eve of the Indian National Army trial says:

*"We are justly proud of their heroic patriotism and inspired by their magnificent devotion that made them so willing to sacrifice their lives so that India might achieved her liberty."*³³

Further she added:

*"How then can we stand by and permit any Penalties at the hands of a foreign Government to be imposed on them as a reward for their loyalty to their own Country."*³⁴

The Nationwide Agitation and Role of Women

Madras: A resolution appealing to Govt. to set free the Indian National Army prisoners immediately was passed at a public meeting under the auspices of the Madras Nationalist Youths Federation at Triplicane.³⁵ Mrs Ammu Swaminathan said the sole aim of the Indian National Army was to win the freedom for India. They embarked upon this task in a spirit of selfless service and were quite prepared for any eventuality. She said it was the duty to see that these men come out unscathed for this purpose they had to make their voices heard by the powers that be and they should also see that the families of these prisoners did not suffer.³⁶

Nanital: A sum of rupees one hundred received by a girl student to the Indian National Army Defense fund in Nanital.³⁷

Allahabad: To mark The trial of the Officers of the Indian National Army, the students of the Turner Hostel Ewing Christian College, Allahabad, had cancelled Dewali illumination in the hostel. The Money raised for the function was sent for the defense of the Officers.³⁸ More than 50,000 people assembled at Sradhanand Park to demand the immediate release of the members of the Indian National Army. The huge gathering comprised a large number of ladies.

Lucknow: The number of students under detained in connection with observance of Indian National Army Day in Lucknow, its stated 84 the remaining 16 having been warned and let off.⁴⁰ The students under detained include four girls namely, Prem Lata Talwani, Satyawati Bhargava, Shanti Chaturvedi and Rajkumari Krishna. Enquiries revealed that the remaining 34 students, including girls, were released on bail. Mr. B. Gupta and Seth Kishorlal had stood as sureties for them.⁴¹

Women Urge Indian National Army Men's Release, New Delhi: A resolution demanding that no action should be taken against officers and men of the Indian National Army and expressing the belief that they acted under the urge of

patriotism for the country and hence could not be classed as traitors or war criminals, was passed at a meeting of ladies of Srimati Memobal presiding.⁴² Shiromani Gurudwara Parbandhak committed collected a sum of Rs 70,000 for the defense of the personnel of the Indian National Army.⁴³ Dhillon of the Indian National Army under court-martial trial, asked the people to make all possible sacrifice for liberation of their country.⁴⁴ Mrs. Dhillon said that she was thankful to the British Government for putting three Indian National Army officers on trial thus giving opportunity to the world of knowing about the heroic deeds done by them.⁴⁵ Mrs. Sarojini Naidu in a statement issued on the eve of the Indian National Army trial says:

*"The sanction behind the urgent and unanimous demand of the country for the release of the Indian National Army prisoners cannot be ignored or resisted with impunity by any Government however powerful. The heart and imagination of India have been captured by the legend of the Indian National Army, Now that gradually the legend is being corroborated by knowledge, is there a single man or woman who is not deeply moved by the epic Quality of courage, endurance, discipline and organized unity of purpose and unconquerable desire and endeavor to deliver our country from bondage."*⁴⁶

Sind Province: A response to an appeal from Dr. Choitram Gidwani, President of the Sind Provincial Congress Committee, batches of Parsi women moved throughout the city to collected donation for Indian National Army's fund.⁴⁷

Lahore: Police made a lathi charge on student, both girls and boys in connection with Indian National Army demonstration in front of the Khalsa College for women. Several students among them some young girls were injured. The general secretary of the Lahore student's congress Prem Nath Lekhl and two other student workers had arrested by the police. Since morning girl students in Lahore groups went about from college and school exhorting students to come out of college and schools. They dashed light into full class rooms shouting Indian National Army slogan. Their numbers swelled and they were joined by boys as they marched from place to place.⁴⁸ Climax to this demonstration in favor of the Indian National Army was reached in the Khalsa College for women, where the police beat some students with batons and knobs. Women police also arrived in large numbers to deal with demonstration. Most of the colleges and schools in the city both for girls and boys were closed. The students had gone on strike. Commotion prevails in several parts of the city where police were seen taking positions, while student workers were announcing through loud speakers.⁴⁹

All-India Women's Conference, Lahore: A resolution demanding immediate release of the men and officers of the Indian National Army unanimously passed by the Central Punjab Branch Conference of the All-India Women's

Conference in Lahore under the presidency of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu. The resolution which was adopted at the conference declared that on alien Government had no right to try the men and officers of the Indian National Army who could be dealt justice only by an Indian people's Govt.⁵⁰ Mrs. Sarojini Naidu moving the resolution from the chair said

*"To say that these brave men allied with the Japanese was wrong, she declared. The only object, for which they suffered so much, was to save India and to remove the enemy from India. They represent the self-respect and honor of India; it is an army of free men who carried on freedom's battle from outside India."*⁵¹

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu pointed to the Presence of school and college girls and elderly women with the badge Save Indian National Army tucked on their saris and asked: Why this badge on you today. You know that it is your own brave patriotic Punjabis, and other countrymen Sahgal, Sha Nawaz and Dhillon, and behind them thousands of other valiant men locked up in the Red Fort and other places. These brave men fought for the defense and honor of our motherland. She said:

*"I want every man, woman and child to remember these men and Work for their release. These men when released will infuse a new sprit in the country, they are very brave and there is nothing against them."*⁵²

West Bengal: Massive public meetings and rallies were organized against The Indian National Army officer's trials. Greater attention was paid in this connection to the Northern Indian cities and to Bengal and Assam.⁵³ Hindu girls including Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's nieces put Tilak on her fore-head with their own blood instead of the customary myrrh.⁵⁴ Mrs. Bimal Pratiba Devi was sent by the Bengal congress to attend the proceedings of the Indian National Army. She met the Indian National Army defense committee members and discussed the question of relief of Indian National Army men.⁵⁵ A meeting was held at Shradhdhananda Park, Calcutta, in connection with the Indian National Army Day, observation.⁵⁶ The gathering was the largest witnessed in Calcutta. More than 50,000 people, including a large number of ladies were present.⁵⁷ Another rally held at Deshapriya Park over three lakhs of people gather during inauguration of Indian National Army week in Calcutta to salutes Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army. Mr. Nehru and Mr. Patel address the unprecedented gathering, Calcutta was agog and all roads led to Deshapriya Park in the southern part of the city.⁵⁸ School and college students abstained from their classes, mill and factory workers took early leave from their masters, office goers quickly finished their Saturday work – and all rushed towards Deshapriya Park shouting all the way "Jai Hind," "Delhi Chalo", "Netaji Ki Jai" etc. joined by thousands of ladies.⁵⁹ Kanak Devi (Bengal) the well knows film star had donated a sum of 2,000 to the Indian National Army Relief Fund Committee Bengal.⁶⁰

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the support for the Indian National Army during the 1945 trials was a watershed moment in India's struggle for independence, with women playing a vital role in mobilizing nationwide support. Through their courage, leadership, and activism, women helped transform the Indian National Army trials into a powerful symbol of resistance against British rule. Women's involvement in the Indian National Army movement challenged traditional gender roles and stereotypes, demonstrating their capacity for leadership and activism. As India celebrates its freedom, it is essential to remember and honor the contributions of these unsung heroines, who risked everything to support the Indian National Army and pave the way for a free and independent India. Their legacy continues to inspire future generations, serving as a testament to the power of women's participation in shaping the country's destiny.



Hindusthan Standard, 15 November 1945. Subash Chandra Bose with Rani Jhansi



Hindusthan Standard,
20 November 1945.
Mrs. Dhillon



Hindusthan Standard,
15 November 1945.
The first commander Capt. Lakshmi,
of Rani Jhansi Regiment.



Advance, 13 December 1945.
Mrs Sarojini Naidu at ladies
meeting at Shraddananda Park.



Hindusthan Standard, 9 December 1945.
The lady volunteers presenting a guard
of honour to Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal
Nehru, S. Sarat Chandra Bose on their
arrival at Deshapriya Park

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