



Women in the Indian National Army: An Analytical and Argumentative Study

R. Murugan¹, M. Gopi²

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of History, Vivekananda College, Tiruvudagam West Madurai, India

² Assistant Professor, Department of History, Nazia College of Arts and Science, Kariyapatti, Virudhunagar, India.

* Corresponding Author:

R. Murugan

murugankishoor880@gmail.com

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received 22 Apr, 2024
Revised 23 May, 2024
Accepted 30 Jun, 2024
Available Online 30 Jun, 2024

ARTICLE ID

HRJHA0202003

KEYWORDS

Indian National Army, Rani Jhansi Regiment, Subhas Chandra Bose, Women in Combat, Indian Independence Movement.



ABSTRACT

The role of women in the Indian National Army (INA) remains an underexplored aspect of India's independence movement. Established under Subhas Chandra Bose, the INA sought to overthrow British rule while also challenging societal gender norms. The formation of the Rani Jhansi Regiment in 1943 marked a radical departure from traditional nationalist movements, granting women military roles beyond auxiliary duties. Led by Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan, the regiment underwent rigorous combat training, symbolizing women's active participation in armed resistance. Despite their dedication, the regiment faced logistical challenges, lack of consistent Japanese support, and eventual disbandment in 1945. The post-independence period failed to integrate these women into military or political leadership, marginalizing their contributions in national history. The INA trials of 1945–46 generated widespread nationalist fervour, yet the role of women in the movement remained overshadowed. This study argues that their participation was not merely symbolic but a transformative moment redefining women's roles in nationalist struggles.



INTRODUCTION

A major but often disregarded chapter in India's independence struggle is the role women play in the Indian National Army (INA). Established under Subhas Chandra Bose, the INA aimed not only towards freedom from colonial control but also questioned accepted gender roles by including women into its ranks. A unprecedented step, the founding of the Rani Jhansi Regiment in 1943 let women assume military duties beyond conventional auxiliary tasks. Their contributions, difficulties, and more general consequences of their involvement in the nationalist fight are discussed in this paper. Captain Mohan Singh established the INA in 1941 with help from Indian POW taken by Japan. Women's involvement at first limited themselves to support for medical aid and fundraising. But when Subhas Chandra Bose arrived, the Rani Jhansi Regiment—a disciplined women's regiment—was formed. This broke with traditional nationalist movements, in which women were mostly limited to non-combatant duties.¹

Under the direction of Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan—later Lakshmi Sehgal—the regiment was intended to be a fighting force. Women received intense instruction in survival skills, tactical moves, and weapon handling. To be ready for active fighting, they picked up rifle, bayonet, and grenade skills. Their plea to Bose—signed with their own blood—demanding direct combat duties clearly showed their dedication. This went against British military rules prohibiting women from active battle as well as Indian patriarchal standards. The Rani Jhansi Regiment, determined as they were, did not participate in real battle as the INA withdrew once Japan's World War II fortunes were fading. Logistically, the unit had to deal with poor supplies and uneven Japanese assistance. Furthermore casting doubt on the INA's autonomy and strategic durability was its reliance on Japan. The INA fell ultimately in 1945, and the regiment was disbanded; many of its soldiers returned to civilian life without official recognition.²

The leadership of Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan epitomised INA women's radicalism. Her resistance to colonial authorities, her detention, and her ongoing activity after independence expose the tenacity of women in the cause. Nonetheless, showing a return to conventional gender norms, post-independence India did not include INA women into military or political leadership despite their wartime efforts. The INA trials of 1945–46 stoked nationalistic feeling, therefore hastening India's road to independence. Still, the role women play in the INA is under-represented in past accounts. Unlike their male colleagues, INA women were mostly left out of leadership positions and post-independence celebrations. This control begs problems with the deletion of female revolutionaries and the inclusiveness of nationalist history. Women's participation in the INA was innovative, defying social conventions and altering gender roles in the independence movement. But subsequently excluded in the historical narrative of independent India, their contributions were limited by practical difficulties. Still, the legacy of these women is a potent reminder of their crucial part in the struggle for India's independence.³

The Revolutionary Background and the Formation of the INA

The larger revolutionary forces rising against British colonial control in the early 20th century provide the roots of the Indian National Army (INA). Leaders of Indian nationalism, especially those unhappy with the nonviolent strategy of the Indian National Congress, looked for other ways to get freedom. Earlier revolutionary events such the Ghadar Movement, the function of the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), and the activity of Indian revolutionaries overseas shaped the creation of the INA. The surrender of British-held territory in Southeast Asia during World War II opened fresh chances for armed resistance. The Japanese seized thousands of Indian troops under the British Army as they were fast advancing through Malaya and Singapore. Understanding the possibility to use nationalist feeling among these POWs, British Indian Army commander Captain Mohan Singh started the concept of creating an armed group made of Indian POWs. Supported by Japan, he founded the first INA in 1941. But differences with Japanese officials over the INA's authority brought to its demise.⁴

Under Subhas Chandra Bose, who had fled British observation in India and flown to Germany before arriving in Japan, the INA discovered fresh leadership. Bose's 1943 arrival in Southeast Asia gave the movement life once again. Reorganising the INA into a defined military hierarchy and a nationalist philosophy anchored on his rallying cry, "Give me blood, and I will give you freedom," he Under Bose's direction, the INA grew and attracted recruits from the Indian diaspora—especially from Malaya and Burma—along with



the already-existing ranks of POWs. One important advancement under Bose's direction was the military ranks' admission of women. In Indian nationalist groups, where women were usually limited to non-combatant tasks like nursing and information collecting, this was unheard of. An important first step in subverting conventional gender roles and increasing women's involvement in the freedom movement was the founding of the all-women military unit, Rani Jhansi Regiment. Together with Japanese troops, the INA started military operations against British-held India. Aiming to pierce British India and spark a general revolution, the army actively participated in the 1944 battles of Imphal and Kohima. But the INA's final loss resulted from logistical problems, tough terrain, and insufficient continuous Japanese military assistance. After the British reclaimed the areas, INA troops—including women fighters—were taken into custody and tried.⁵

The INA was instrumental in forming India's nationalist movement even if its military performance was disastrous. Particularly for its top officials, the INA trials in 1945–46 attracted great popular support and stoked anti-colonial sentiment all throughout India. Women's involvement in the INA also subverted conventional wisdom and opened the path for further conversations on gender roles in India after independence. The revolutionary roots of the INA and its development under Bose underlined the junction of nationalist ambitions, global connections, and radical ideologies forming the fight for Indian freedom. The INA had a long-lasting effect on India's struggle against colonial control and the larger conversation on women's involvement in revolutionary movements even if it finally failed to achieve its immediate military goals.⁶

Women's Participation and the Formation of the Rani Jhansi Regiment

Women's involvement in the Indian freedom campaign underwent a sea change when the Rani Jhansi Regiment was founded in 1943. Beyond traditional responsibilities for women, Subhas Chandra Bose's ideology promoted their active participation in military conflict. Women mostly involved in nonviolent protest and social change in the nationalist movements of the period stood in sharp contrast to this endeavour. Women were recruited into the regiment via a methodically controlled procedure. From the Indian expatriate population in Southeast Asia, especially in Burma, Malaya, and Singapore, Bose and his friends recruited volunteers. The answer was tremendous as many women see the regiment as a chance to actively support India's liberation fight. Driven by a common nationalist passion, they came from all backgrounds—including professionals, housewives, and students as well as housekeepers. Appointed as the commander of the regiment, Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan highlighted Bose's dedication to empower women in her choice. The trainees received intense military training under her direction, encompassing physical endurance, weapon handling, and tactical movements. To be ready for front-line action, the ladies trained with bayonets, grenades, and rifles. Beyond just physical instruction, they were imbued with nationalist philosophy and discipline, therefore strengthening their military rather than symbolic purpose.⁷

Named after Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi, a symbol of female resistance during the 1857 rebellion, the regiment was This historical reference helped to encourage and justify women's involvement in armed conflict. The recruits were inspired to challenge conventional gender roles by the great resonance of Lakshmibai as a warrior queen. The Rani Jhansi Regiment had various difficulties notwithstanding their training and preparation. The INA's operational problems combined with Japan's weakening position in World War II restricted its deployment. Mostly engaged in reconnaissance, logistical support, and morale-building activities, they were stationed in Burma and along the Indo-Burma border. Though direct combat prospects were few, for an Indian women's unit their involvement in military activities was unparalleled.⁸

The regiment broke up after the INA disbanded in 1945 when Japan surrendered. Although British officials seized and questioned several of its members, their resistance remained unflinching. The INA experiments in 1945–46 made public their contributions, which stoked nationalistic feeling all throughout India. Their post-independence acceptance was limited, however, and the achievements of their male colleagues often eclipsed their involvement in the fight. Participating in the Rani Jhansi Regiment, women made a bold declaration of gender equality within the nationalist struggle. Their readiness to serve in the military questioned ingrained social conventions and changed the range of women's participation in India's fight for independence. Though the regiment had a brief life, its impact as a symbol of female power and revolutionary dedication in the struggle for freedom persists.⁹

Argument for Women's Active Combat Participation

The inclusion of women in active combat roles in the INA was not merely symbolic but represented a crucial ideological shift in the fight for Indian independence. Subhas Chandra Bose's advocacy for women's participation in warfare challenged deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, redefining the role of women in national movements. The Rani Jhansi Regiment was a testament to this transformation, proving that women were as capable as men in military engagements. Bose's argument for women in combat was rooted in the belief that true independence required breaking free from both colonial oppression and societal constraints. He emphasized that if women were to claim equal status in an independent India, they had to participate equally in its liberation. This idea resonated with many female recruits, who saw their enlistment not just as a nationalist duty but as a personal assertion of agency and self-determination. The rigorous training provided to the Rani Jhansi Regiment reinforced the feasibility of women's combat roles. They mastered weapons handling, close combat techniques, and battlefield strategies, demonstrating that their participation was not a token gesture but a practical necessity. Their willingness to undergo the same rigorous training as male soldiers further validated their capability and commitment.¹⁰

The psychological impact of women in combat also played a critical role. Their presence in the army served as a morale booster for the male soldiers, reinforcing the notion that the struggle for independence was inclusive and universal. Furthermore, their participation inspired women across India to challenge restrictive gender norms, planting the seeds for future social and political movements. While the Rani Jhansi Regiment did not engage in significant combat due to the INA's operational setbacks, their presence alone was revolutionary. The regiment's formation sent a powerful message to both British authorities and Indian society, proving that women could and should play active roles in national struggles. The legacy of these women continues to influence debates on gender equality in the military and beyond.¹¹

Despite the revolutionary aspirations of the INA, the practical implementation of women's participation in active combat was limited. The INA's retreat in the face of Allied advances meant that the Rani Jhansi Regiment did not engage in significant battle engagements. Furthermore, the regiment faced logistical challenges, including inadequate supplies, lack of reinforcements, and inconsistent support from the Japanese forces, who saw the INA as a tool rather than an equal ally. The INA's reliance on external powers such as Japan for military support raises questions about its autonomy. The involvement of women in the INA, while radical, was ultimately constrained by the broader limitations faced by the organization itself. The collapse of the INA in 1945 led to the disbandment of the regiment, with many of its members sent back home.¹²

Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan (Sehgal): A Case Study

Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan, later known as Lakshmi Sehgal, was a pioneering figure in the Indian National Army (INA) and a symbol of women's active involvement in India's struggle for independence. As the commander of the Rani Jhansi Regiment, she played a crucial role in shaping the women's military wing of the INA, demonstrating extraordinary leadership and resilience in the face of adversity.¹³

Born in 1914, Lakshmi Swaminathan was a qualified medical professional before she joined the INA. She had been actively involved in nationalist activities and was deeply influenced by the call for independence. Her meeting with Subhas Chandra Bose in Singapore proved to be a turning point in her life. Bose, impressed by her determination and skills, entrusted her with the command of the newly formed women's regiment. Under her leadership, the Rani Jhansi Regiment underwent intensive training in combat, discipline, and survival techniques. She instilled in her recruits the belief that women could fight alongside men for India's liberation. Her strategic acumen and ability to inspire her troops made her one of the most respected figures in the INA.¹⁴

Despite the INA's setbacks, Dr. Lakshmi Sehgal remained committed to the cause of Indian independence. After the INA's defeat and her subsequent capture by British authorities, she faced imprisonment but refused to abandon her nationalist convictions. Following India's independence, she continued her work as a social activist and medical practitioner, dedicating her life to public service. Dr. Lakshmi Sehgal's legacy endures as a testament to the role of women in India's freedom struggle. Her



leadership in the INA challenged gender norms and set a precedent for women's participation in national movements. Her contributions remain an integral part of the history of India's fight for independence.¹⁵

The INA trials, particularly those of Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Sahgal, and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, ignited widespread nationalist sentiment in India, contributing to the final push for independence. However, the contributions of women in the INA have often been overshadowed in mainstream historical narratives. This omission reflects a broader pattern in historiography, where women's roles in revolutionary movements are either minimized or framed within conventional gendered expectations. Despite their sacrifices, the post-independence government did little to formally acknowledge the role of INA women. The absence of women from the political and military leadership in independent India suggests that their participation in the INA did not translate into sustained gender equality in national discourse. This lack of recognition raises critical questions about the inclusivity of India's nationalist historiography.

CONCLUSION

The participation of women in the INA was a groundbreaking moment in India's struggle for independence. Their involvement went beyond symbolic representation and challenged contemporary notions of gender and nationalism. However, the limitations faced by the Rani Jhansi Regiment and the subsequent marginalization of these women in independent India highlight the complexities of their contributions. The INA's approach to gender equality, while progressive, was ultimately constrained by the broader socio-political landscape. The failure to institutionalize the radical gender policies of the INA in post-independence India reflects the transient nature of such revolutionary movements. Nevertheless, the legacy of these women remains an important chapter in India's history, serving as a reminder of the often-overlooked role of women in armed struggles for national liberation.

REFERENCES

1. Bejin Mitra and P. Chakraborty, eds., *The Rebel India* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1946), 154.
2. *Congress Radio Calling* (Bombay: Congress Publications, 1942), 4.
3. *Congress Radio Calling*, No. II (Papers in possession of Usha Mehta).
4. Ibid.
5. *August Struggle Report*, Part II (Bombay: AICC Publications, 1943), 184.
6. *Report of the Pradesh Congress Committee on the Happenings in Karnataka, August 9, 1942 to September 20, 1942* (Bangalore: Pradesh Congress Committee, 1942), 3.
7. *Karnataka Provincial Congress Committee, Brief Report on Happenings in Karnataka, November 1, 1942 to November 15, 1942* (Bangalore: KPCC, 1942).
8. *The Tribune* (Lahore), February 1946.
9. *Inquilab*, monthly journal of the Indian National Congress, Eastern Zone, ed. Rammanohar Lohia and Aruna Asaf Ali (March 1944, A.I.C.C. Library, New Delhi).
10. Pyare Lal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1956), 37.
11. Ibid.
12. *The Tribune* (Lahore), February 18, 1946.
13. Ibid.
14. *The Tribune* (Lahore), March 7, 1946.
15. Bejoy Benarjee, *Indian War of Independence* (Calcutta: National Book Agency, 1947), 82; *The Tribune* (Lahore), March 7, 1946.