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WOMEN AGAINST THE RAJ



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WOMEN AGAINST THE RAJ

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment

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*To the women who dared —
The Rani of Jhansi Regiment*

“I wanted to die for India ...”

Statement by several survivors of
the Rani of Jhansi Regiment

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MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

I first met Professor Emerita Joyce Chapman Lebra in January 2007 in Kolkata, where the Netaji Research Bureau had organized a Golden Jubilee Conference on Subhas Chandra Bose. The conference's theme was the effect of World War II on Asian independence. To listen to Professor Lebra was to be reminded of her substantial contribution to the literature on the Indian National Army's role in Southeast Asia. I thought immediately that she could bring her scholarship to bear on the task of recording, and thereby preserving, the INA's legacy. I spoke to her, and we agreed that one particular area that needed looking at was the way in which the Rani of Jhansi Regiment had contributed to the INA's work, both materially and ideationally. The idea of women taking up arms against the Raj was not new: women revolutionaries in Bengal, among other places in India, had blazed the way. The story had been told. But the story of a combat-ready women's regiment in an anti-colonial army in Southeast Asia needed to be fleshed out to enhance understanding of the INA's larger contribution to anti-colonialism in this region. That was the point of the book project that I suggested to Professor Lebra to which she agreed readily. ISEAS is pleased to have been involved in the production of this book.

*K. Kesavapany
Director
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
Singapore*

FOREWORD

Much has been written about Subhas Chandra Bose in the annals of India's Independence struggle. Likewise, the Indian National Army (INA) that he raised in Singapore has also been extensively researched by scholars worldwide. A part of the INA was the all-women "Rani of Jhansi Regiment" that was raised and led entirely by local Indian women in Southeast Asia. Many of the rank and file were from the rubber plantations and housewives. The historical "Rani of Jhansi", whose bravery in the struggle against the British is well-known to students of Indian history, was what Bose invoked for the women's regiment that formed part of the INA. The active role in the Independence struggle by women in his mother country has also received attention in this book.

This book should be fascinating reading for all interested in Asian history, particularly for those who did not live through the tumultuous era in which the INA also appeared on the terrain of wartime Southeast Asia. This eloquent and evocative account of that Regiment by Professor Joyce Lebra, 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.

Professor Joyce Lebra, who has played a crucial role in recording the INA's history in general, is well-equipped to author this pioneering work on the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Her meticulous research and imaginative analysis are evident in this book. One of the book's particular strengths is the way in which she combines research-based evidence on women's valiant role in history and the heroic spirit that they displayed in the war against the British. The accounts of courageous local Indian women, some of whom left comfortable lives to take part in the struggle, make this book of deep human interest as well.

I commend the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies for having embarked on a book that will record for posterity the lives, thoughts and actions of an

irreplaceable generation of Southeast Asian women, who would otherwise remain unknown and unremembered. I compliment Professor Lebra for having produced such a rich and textured record of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment and the role that it played in the struggle for Indian Independence.

S. R. Nathan
President of Singapore

PREFACE

I was invited to the Golden Jubilee Conference at the Netaji Research Bureau in Kolkata on 23 January 2007. There I met a major speaker, Janaki Athi Nahappan, who during World War II was second in command of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, part of the Indian National Army. She invited me to visit her in Kuala Lumpur to write her story and the story of the Regiment. I had commented at a session of the conference that a definitive study of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment remained to be written. As I have written two books on the historical Rani of Jhansi and one on the Indian National Army,¹ several people at the conference suggested that I write the history of the Regiment. Subsequently I was also invited to visit Dr Lakshmi Sahgal in Kanpur, who commanded the Regiment, an extraordinary woman in her nineties who still practices medicine. She has also written her autobiography.² This combination of invitations was enticing, but I wondered how I would finance such a study. I then received an offer of a fellowship from Ambassador Kesavapany, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. With this encouragement, I was on my way to India and Southeast Asia to embark on the project.

Regarding the organization of this book, Subhas Chandra Bose was creator of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment as part of the Indian National Army and is key to its story. Since he invoked the name and image of the historical Rani of Jhansi for the name of the Regiment, a brief survey of her life and legend serves as the background for the story of the Regiment.

Bose's revolutionary ideology was nurtured in the fertile soil of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal, the fulcrum of revolutionary nationalism in the subcontinent, and we consider here its generative components. Bose knew many of the Bengali women whose nationalism erupted in revolutionary acts, and he, while encouraging these women, was inspired by the germ of the idea of a unit of women armed to fight for independence. We consider these noteworthy women here.

Bose himself was a complex though in adulthood single-minded individual, passionately dedicated to attaining India's liberation from the slavery of colonialism. His early life before he left for Southeast Asia is considered in a chapter.

Once Bose reached Southeast Asia, he turned immediately to galvanizing all three million Indians there in the struggle for independence, mostly as civilian support in the Indian Independence League in Singapore, Malaya, Burma, and Thailand. His major effort, however, was revitalizing the Indian National Army, which had earlier origins in the British surrender in Malaya and Singapore and in Japanese intelligence warfare. As the legitimizing organ of the Army, he created the Free India Provisional Government, with a cabinet, bank, and territorial base. The epic struggle of the Indian National Army is an integral part of the history of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, for the Regiment as part of the INA was trained by INA men, and the fate of the RJR and INA was inextricably intertwined in Malaya and Burma.

Creation of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment has been described as Bose's pet project, his favourite dream. The story of the Regiment is an extraordinary one. The women who responded to Bose's call to fight for Indian liberation were primarily teenage girls from rubber plantations in Malaya, girls who had never seen India but were nevertheless eager to volunteer at the risk of their lives in battle to see India freed. What we explore here is their motivation, their sense of Indian identity, the reasons they dedicated not only their gold jewellery but their lives in response to Netaji's appeal.

Despite the plethora of books on Bose and the INA, scant mention of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment is found in these volumes, typically not even a mention. Studies by Leonard Gordon and Peter Fay are two exceptions that do contain passages on the Regiment.³ Unfortunately I came to this subject too late to be able to interview many survivors of the Regiment. I was fortunate to spend some time with Lakshmi Sahgal, the commander of the Regiment, in Kanpur, and to visit Janaki Athi Nahappan, second in command, in Kuala Lumpur, as well as to interview her son. Other survivors with written information of their roles were also generous with information — Rasammah Bhupalan, about whom an excellent biography has appeared,⁴ and Manawati Arya, who has written about Bose with some chapters on the Regiment.⁵ I was also able to locate and interview a few survivors from the Malayan rubber estates, women who had less education and lived less public lives after the war.

It is my hope that this study will help to fill the lacuna in the fascinating story of this exceptional band of young women who "wanted to die for India", to make India free.

Notes

- ¹ Joyce Chapman Lebra, *The Rani of Jhansi: A Study in Female Heroism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986); *Durga's Sword* (Delhi: Harper-Collins, 1995); *Jungle Alliance: Japan and the Indian National Army* (Singapore: Asia/Pacific Press, 1971). Mention must be made here of a study by Rohini Gawankar, *The Women's Regiment and Captain Lakshmi of INA* (New Delhi: Devika Publications, 2003) as the major exception to the dearth of sources on the subject.
- ² Lakshmi Sahgal, *A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs of a Political Activist* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997).
- ³ Leonard Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Peter Ward Fay, *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942–1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993).
- ⁴ Aruna Gopinath, *Footprints on the Sands of Time: Rasammah Bhupalan, A Life of Purpose* (Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia, 2007).
- ⁵ Manawati Arya, *Patriot: The Unique Indian Leader, Subhas Chandra Bose* (New Delhi: Lotus Press, 2007).

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It was thanks to historians at the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Netaji Research Bureau in Kolkata that the original inspiration for the study occurred, and I am grateful to the family of Professors Krishna and Sugata Bose and the Netaji Research Bureau for providing archival, logistic, and other assistance for this as well as for previous research.

I am also obliged to Donald Johnson of the Ames Library on South Asia at the University of Minnesota, and to the staff of the University of Chicago Library South Asia section for assistance in their collections.

I extend my heartfelt thanks to survivors of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment who enthusiastically shared memories as I interviewed them: Lakshmi Sahgal, Janaki Athi Nahappan, Rasammah Bhupalan, Manawati Arya, Meenachi, Muniammah, Anjalai, Anjaly, and Ammaloo.

I am also deeply grateful to Muthammal Palanisamy and her daughters Rajilakshmi and Ananthalakshmi, not only for translating interviews from Tamil to English but also for hospitality for several days in Rawang to

undertake interviews. Muthammal also provided the Rubber Tappers Song. I am grateful to Captain Gandhinathan of the INA for arranging contacts in Penang.

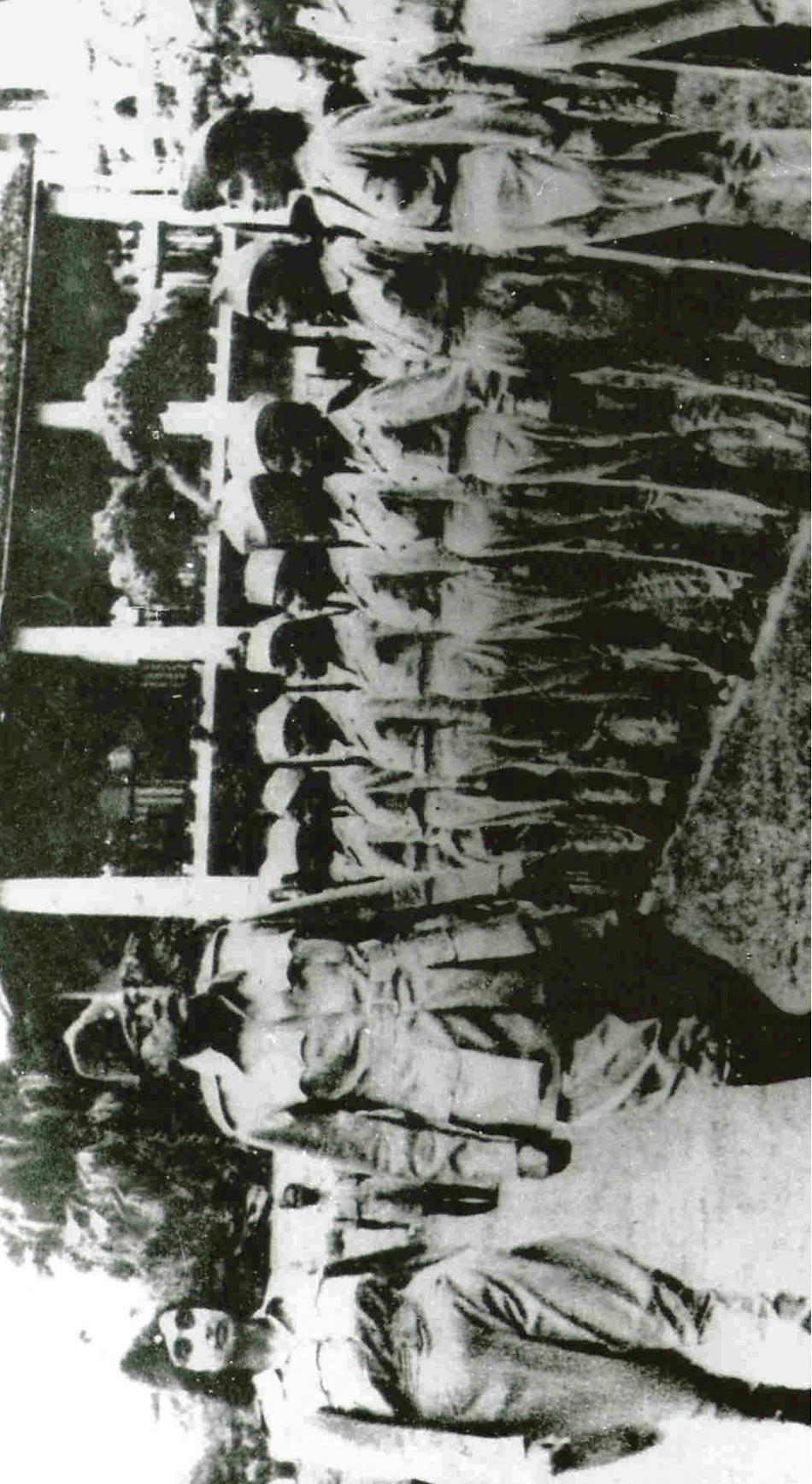
I also wish to thank Mr Ishwar Nahppan, Professor Aruna Gopinath, and Regiment survivor Meenachi for making photographs available. Thanks also to Adrian Lee for preparing the photographs for publication. Photographs were also provided to the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies by Professor Sugata Bose and the Netaji Research Bureau on the occasion of the 19 June 2007 launch of the twelve-volume series, *Netaji Collected Works*. Some of those photographs are included in this volume. Mr Nahappan also provided valuable information on the career of his mother, Janaki, second in command in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

It goes without saying that responsibility for any errors of fact or interpretation rests with me alone.

*Joyce Chapman Lebra
Singapore, 2008*



Volunteers for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment
Courtesy of the Netaji Research Bureau



Lakshmi Swaminathan and Netaji reviewing RJR troops
Courtesy of the Netaji Research Bureau



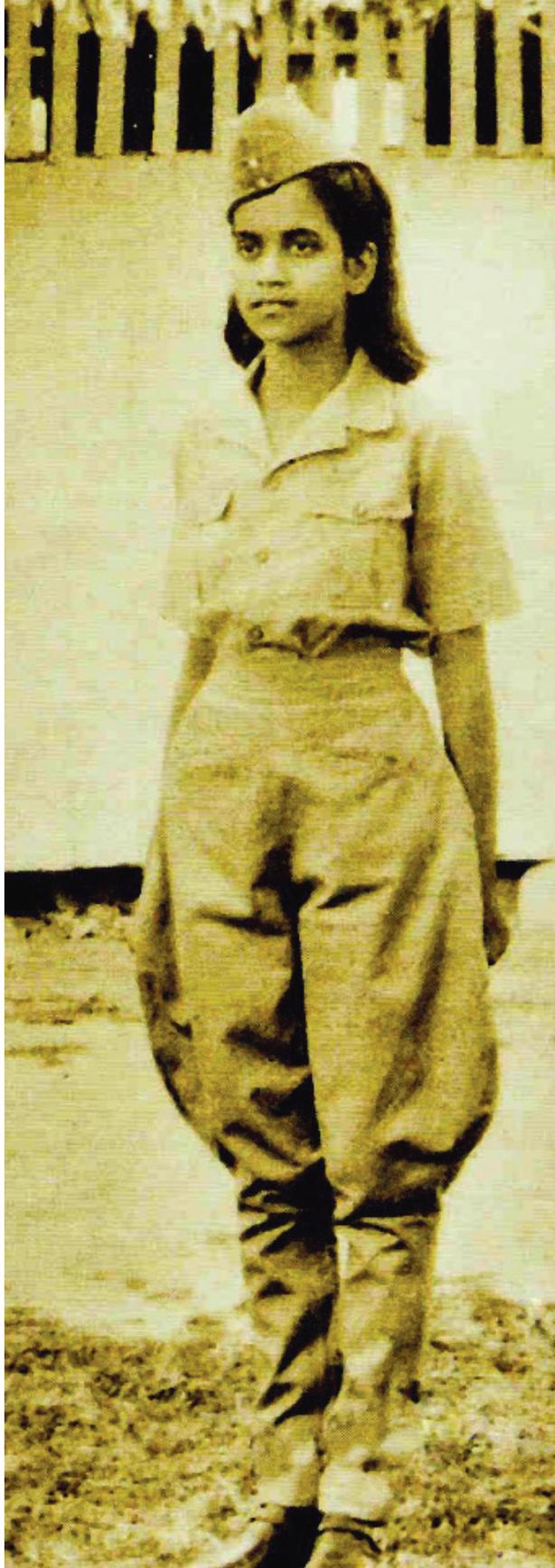
Four RJR veterans at the INA reunion in Kuala Lumpur, 27 January 2008.

Photo taken by the author



Josephine, killed in Burma
Courtesy of Meenachi

Rasammah Bhupalan
*Permission by Rasammah Bhupalan
and Professor Aruna Gopinath for
photograph reproduced from Footprints
on the Sands of Time: Rasammah
Bhupalan, A Life of Purpose.*





Janaki Davar, second in
command of the RJR
Courtesy of Ishwar Nahappan



Muniamma saluting in her wartime cap
Photo taken by the author



Contemporary photo of line houses
Photo taken by the author



ஜான்சிராணிப் படையின் இளம் விராங்கனைகள் மகிழ்ச்சியில் திளைத்துள்ளனர். நினைவில் நிற்கும் சிரிப்பைச் சிந்தும் இவர்களில் நம்மோடு இன்னும் வாழ்ந்து கொண்டிருப்பவர்களுக்கு நமது வாழ்த்துகளும் - பாராட்டுகளும்.

Wartime photo of RJR girls
Courtesy of Meenachi