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# Recruiting the all-female Rani of Jhansi Regiment: Subhas Chandra Bose and Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan<sup>1</sup>

*Tobias Rettig*

**Abstract:** The recruitment of the all-female Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army in Japanese-controlled Singapore and Malaya, with a particular focus on the period between the first female guard of honour on 12 July 1943 through to the opening of the regiment's main camp in Singapore on 22 October 1943, has to date been insufficiently studied. Starting with the conception of the Regiment in an Axis submarine by the Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945), this paper examines the ideas and figures that inspired the regiment and the role of Bose and Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan (1914–2012) in mobilizing recruits. A division of labour can be distinguished, whereby Bose's rallies and speeches awakened a desire and commitment to join the regiment, whereas Dr Lakshmi used a door-to-door approach and access to homes to convince parents and to confirm participation. By 22 October 1943, 156 women and girls from among the Indian communities in Singapore and Malaya from a wide range of ethnic, social, religious and language backgrounds had joined the regiment that was part of Bose's plan to liberate India from British domination. Among the key sources used in this paper are Dr Lakshmi's late-1960s autobiography and the 2007 autobiographical account of one of her then 16-year-old recruits, Rasammah Naomi Navarednam (b 1927).

**Keywords:** Rani of Jhansi Regiment; Indian National Army; Subhas Chandra Bose; Lakshmi Swaminadhan

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On his long submarine journey from the naval port of Kiel in northern Germany to the Japanese Imperial Navy's offshore outpost of Sabang just north of Aceh, the Indian nationalist leader Subhas Chandra Bose (23 January 1897–18 August 1945) meticulously prepared the blueprint for the mission that would occupy the

<sup>1</sup> Thanks to various research assistants who have helped me over the years: the late Joanne Karen Chen, the late Rajan Rishyakaran, Adrian Cheng Sai Pong, Sugumaran Devaraja, Yeo Shan Hui, Surekha Ahgir Yadav, Sukanto Lacson Chanda, Siddarth Poddar, Sonika Kaur Dhaliwal and Teo Kay Key. Thanks are due also to the Singapore Management University's Research Grant for financial support, and in particular its late director, Professor Winston Koh, for encouraging me to leave early 1930s French Indochina behind to engage in 'more contemporary' research. I am most grateful to Rasammah Bhupalan and Janaki Athi Nahappan for sharing their insights on their experiences in the RJR, Mr Poonampalan for sharing his experience in the INA, and to S.R. Nathan for confirming the location of the Singapore camp of the RJR. I am also very grateful to Mr Kesavapany, to Nilanjana Sengupta, Kevin Blackburn, Karl Hack, and the Indian High Commission for their interest and invitations to events, and for sharing information.

last two-and-a-half years of his life.<sup>2</sup> The firebrand Bengali politician and former President of the Indian Congress (1938–39) had been identified as the only credible leader to resuscitate the fledgling Indian National Army (INA) composed of former Indian prisoners of war from the defeated British forces in Singapore and the Indian Independence League (IIL).<sup>3</sup> From at least late May 1942, Bose had sought out ways to leave Berlin for Asia because he realized that his best chances to end the British Raj – following Germany’s defeat at Stalingrad on 2 February and the successful Japanese onslaught on South East Asia, including the surrender of Singapore on 15 February 1942 – now lay in South East and East Asia rather than in Germany.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to Germany, where he had managed to raise a 4,000-strong Indian Legion largely recruited from Indian soldiers captured in North Africa, he would be much closer to India if based in Singapore or even Rangoon.<sup>5</sup> Closer proximity aside, he could expect to resuscitate the INA and the IIL by mobilizing the Indian communities in South East Asia for the liberation of India.<sup>6</sup> Bose’s ambitious blueprint for ‘total mobilization’ therefore also included the creation of an all-female regiment, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, which was in line with his earlier activism and politics.

This paper will take the reader through the early months of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, from its blueprint to the early stages of its conception, including a 20-woman-strong guard of honour in Singapore on 12 July 1943, Bose’s appointment one day later of Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan to develop this nucleus into a proper regiment, and the initial growth of this rump unit to almost 100 women by the end of August.<sup>7</sup> The article also discusses Bose’s rallies in Malaya that brought in

<sup>2</sup> The voyage, which began on 9 February and ended on 6 May 1943, with a change from a German to a Japanese submarine some ‘four hundred nautical miles off the coast of Madagascar’ on 28 April, is covered in Sugata Bose (2011) *His Majesty’s Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle against Empire*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, pp 232–236.

<sup>3</sup> The first INA had initially comprised about 16,000 Indian prisoners of war and could have had up to 40,000, if not for Japanese unwillingness to provide more weapons. Tensions between its then leader, Captain Mohan Singh, and the Japanese, but also internal tensions in the INA and uncertainties about the suitability of the leader of the IIL, the Bengali revolutionary Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945; no relation to Subhas), had led to a crisis at the end of 1942 and reduced the first INA to about 12,000 men. For a very good discussion of the most likely number, see Peter Ward Fay (1993) *The Forgotten Army: India’s Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942–1945*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, pp 525 ff. Following Subhas Chandra’s arrival in South East Asia in early July 1943, an additional 8,000 to 10,000 ‘ex-Indian Army men’ and 18,000 ‘Indian civilians’ joined the second INA.

<sup>4</sup> Bose, *supra* note 2, at pp 213, 219; Joyce Chapman Lebra (2008) *The Indian National Army and Japan*, ISEAS, Singapore (reprint of *Jungle Alliance: Japan and the Indian National Army*, 1971, Donald Moore, Singapore), pp 110–112.

<sup>5</sup> Bose had thus managed to recruit fewer than 25% of the ‘nearly [17,000] Indian [POWs] in German and Italian captivity’ for his Indian Legion; see Bose, *supra* note 2, at p 210; for Africa: Lebra, *supra* note 4, at p 109. She writes that ‘approximately’ 3,000 POWs joined.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Indian civilian population in Europe, which was negligible, one secondary source estimates the Indians in South East Asia to have numbered 1.5 to 2 million, of which about one million were in Burma alone; see Leonard A. Gordon (1990), *Brothers Against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose*, Columbia University Press, New York, p 465. Bose, *supra* note 2, at pp 247 ff, estimates the numbers of the most important Indian communities in the region in mid-1943 as ‘nearly a million’ for Malaya, ‘some [800,000]’ for Burma, and ‘about [60,000]’ for Thailand.

<sup>7</sup> Less is known about the Rangoon side of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. A very brief overview is provided by Joyce Chapman Lebra (2008), *Women Against the Raj: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment*, ISEAS, Singapore, pp 81 ff. Even less is known about a camp in Bangkok, which is usually mentioned in one single sentence. See, for example, Geraldine Forbes (1997), ‘Introduction’, in

additional commitments to join the regiment, including first-person accounts by two future 'Ranis'. The paper argues that Dr Lakshmi's tour of the Malayan mainland in September 1943 was crucial in convincing the many female volunteers, but also their parents if they were teenagers, that the regiment was for real.

As the Indian National Army and its Rani of Jhansi Regiment left barely any significant shred of a paper trail,<sup>8</sup> I will draw on autobiographies, interviews and secondary literature to provide the first article-length account of the recruitment and constitution of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. In particular, I refer to the autobiography of Dr Lakshmi Sahgal (née Swaminadhan) because her uncontested leadership position right from the start provided her with a unique overview of the regiment's constitution.<sup>9</sup> To a lesser extent, I draw also on the autobiographical chapter of one of her recruits, Rasammah Bhupalan (née Navarednam), and the recollections of Janaki Athi Nahappan (née Davar).<sup>10</sup>

### Subhas Chandra Bose's conception of the regiment and identification of a suitable role model

From the start of his active political career in the 1920s, Bose appealed to women to make it their duty to look after the nation and not just their families, and he also encouraged them to 'boycott foreign cloths, carry on propaganda among women and organise "women's societies"'.<sup>11</sup> In 1928, he organized a 300-strong women's section of the Bengali Volunteers who would parade in the streets of Calcutta on the occasion of the Indian Congress's gathering in the city.<sup>12</sup> This was an early prototype of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, as evident in the section leader being referred to as 'Colonel Latika', even though the female volunteers marched unarmed

Lakshmi Sahgal, *A Revolutionary Life: Memoirs of a Political Activist, with an Introduction by Geraldine Forbes*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, p xxi; and Amritlal Seth (1946), *Jai-Hind: The Diary of a Rebel Daughter of India with the Rani of Jhansi Regiment*, Relief Fund for Families of the Azad Hind Fauj Soldiers, Janmabhoomi Prakashan Mandir, Bombay, p 68.

<sup>8</sup> See the excellent discussion of the 'beggarly' state of sources in Fay, *supra* note 3, at pp 553–563.

<sup>9</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7. Ritu Menon's preface suggests that the autobiography was 'originally written in the late 1960s' (p vi) at the request of 'Comrade E.M.S. Namboodiripad' (p vii), with translations into Malayalam and Hindi. As Peter Ward Fay had started interviewing Dr Lakshmi Sahgal and her husband, Prem Kumar Sahgal (1917–92), who had served as Bose's military secretary in the mid-1960s, it is quite conceivable that his interviews and follow-up questions are also related to this first manuscript; see Fay, *supra* note 3, at pp viii–ix, 559–560. In fact, Fay (p 526) refers to an undated, privately printed 'little book', given to him by Dr Sahgal's younger sister, Mrinalini, but he fails to mention when he received it.

<sup>10</sup> Mrs Bhupalan's autobiographical chapter forms part of her biography by Aruna Gopinath (2007), *Footprints on the Sands of Time: Rasammah Bhupalan: A Life of Purpose*, Arkib Negara Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. The entire chapter of 56 pages, 'The Rani of Jhansi Regiment: a will for freedom' (pp 49–104), is written in the autobiographical 'I' form, whereas the rest of the book (with the exception of a five-page section on 'My family my anchor', pp 463–467) is in the biographical third person based on Gopinath's interviews with Rasammah over a two-year period from 2003 to 2005; see p 503. Interview with Rasammah Bhupalan, August 2011, Kuala Lumpur. She has a BA in History (Honours) from the University of Malaya (then located in Singapore), where Professor Northcote Parkinson and the external examiner, Professor D.G.E. Hall (SOAS), encouraged her to embark on a postgraduate degree in London. At SOAS, C.D. Cowan was her immediate MA thesis supervisor, but Rasammah's studies on Penang and the East India Company were cut short after the Suez Crisis and the related energy shortages had led to severe asthma problems. See Gopinath, *ibid.*, pp 141 ff, 147 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Nilanjana Sengupta (2012), *A Gentleman's Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in South-east Asia*, ISEAS, Singapore, p 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 23 ff.

and dressed in saris.<sup>13</sup> The women volunteers also served as a nucleus for a ‘loose network’ of young Bengali women revolutionaries, to the extent that Bose was, according to Geraldine Forbes, ‘considered by many [of them] as Bengal’s champion of women’s rights’.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the female section of the Bengali Volunteers, Bose chose to give the regiment a suitable name that would allow for easy identification while also not being too controversial or radical. Lakshmibai, the Rani (Queen) of the princely state of Jhansi (c 1828–58), fitted his needs.<sup>15</sup> She had led her subjects against the British during the 1857–58 Indian Rebellion (or Indian Mutiny) and, following her death in battle, had become the folk heroine of what not only Bose would later refer to as the First Indian War of Independence. Her fate, as the widowed and childless caretaker of her late husband’s interests and his adopted son, symbolized to many Indians the injustice of ‘company rule’, as the Governor-General used circumstances such as hers in order to swallow additional territories by means of the doctrine of lapse. The Rani had first defended her traditional rights by means of law and diplomacy, but the onset and then the spread of the Indian Mutiny to her territory created a situation in which it was difficult not to take sides. After insurgents massacred company officials and their families, whose evacuation from Jhansi they had asked her to protect, she was accused of siding with the rebels. Having shown an inclination for the martial arts from a young age, Rani Lakshmibai organized a last stand against the British at Gwalior, personally led her military force into battle, and on 17 June 1858 died on the battlefield.

Rani Lakshmibai’s exploits were immortalized in poems, literature and the visual arts. She also cut a martial figure in representations showing her on horseback, sword and shield in hand, riding into battle. Other representations showed the horse-riding Rani with her adopted son bundled on her back, and thus even further stressed her femininity and nurturing side. Moreover, her anticolonialism could easily be given a subcontinental, nationalistic meaning that would appeal to twentieth century audiences. Hers was a good story to tell and had the potential to appeal not only to women, but also to men, not least because Lakshmibai also upheld the rights of her late husband and their adopted son. Importantly, the Rani was from the subcontinent’s heartlands, and Bose was always watchful about not being seen as partial to any one region, in particular to his native Bengal. The Rani also created a link between the First Indian War of Independence and the Second War of Indian Independence that Bose was waging. Finally, the youth of the Rani was palpable, which most certainly must have appealed to the many young girls and women whom he sought to attract.

On the third day after his arrival in Singapore, Bose addressed the remaining 12,000 soldiers of the first INA at the Singapore Padang, the green playing field located between City Hall and the then nearby sea, in the late morning of Monday 5 July 1943.<sup>16</sup> Civilians attended too, including Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan, a 28-

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p 24. Latika Ghosh was Sri Aurobindo’s niece.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p 24; Sengupta directly cites from Geraldine H. Forbes (1980) ‘The women revolutionaries of Bengal’, *The Oracle*, Vol 2, No 2, p 7.

<sup>15</sup> Lebra, *supra* note 7, at pp 1–9 (chapter 1, ‘The historical Rani’) provides a good overview. Her book-length study provides more depth and context; see Joyce Chapman Lebra (1986) *The Rani of Jhansi: A Study in Female Heroism in India*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, HI.

<sup>16</sup> Bose, *supra* note 2, at pp 4, 245. Land reclamations have since pushed the seashore considerably further away.

year-old doctor and member of the women's section of the Indian Independence League, who would become his most trusted female lieutenant. Appearing for the first time in military clothing, Dr Lakshmi recalls that Bose was announced as the Supreme Commander of the INA, and then addressed his audience, arguing that 'the final victory could only come through armed struggle' in the 'final and most crucial stage' of the Indian independence struggle.<sup>17</sup> When he asked for the consent of all INA soldiers and South East Asian civilians to follow his ambitious programme, he connected directly as 'the entire audience stood up, the jawans [soldiers] lifted their rifles above their heads and the civilians roared their consent'.<sup>18</sup> Continuing to work the crowd, Bose stressed that he 'wanted a total mobilisation of manpower and all the resources of the Indians in SEA'.<sup>19</sup> The participation of Indian civilians was vital because 'he wanted the INA to be an absolutely independent army' and therefore recruitment for 'all physically fit Indians [...] would start immediately'.<sup>20</sup>

Bose then 'dropped a bombshell' when '[h]e said the Army of Liberation would be incomplete unless women also came forward and volunteered for the fighting ranks'.<sup>21</sup> 'It was his desire to raise a women's regiment called the Rani of Jhansi Regiment after Rani Laxmi Bai of Jhansi who fought so valiantly against the British in 1857 [*sic*].'<sup>22</sup> For Lakshmi, 'this was the highlight of his speech,' even though '[m]ost of the others felt it could never be done'.<sup>23</sup>

On Friday 9 July, at a mass rally that brought together 60,000 civilians,<sup>24</sup> Bose again stressed the importance of having male and female civilians joining the INA. If the INA remained made up of *jawans* and officers, then it would be easy for the British to depict this 'token force of ex-Indian army personnel' as Japanese 'stooges'.<sup>25</sup> 'Therefore,' in the words of Lakshmi, 'if it was to be a true Indian National Army, every physically fit Indian should enlist. Above all, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment must be raised to dispel all talk of the INA being a puppet army. He stressed the need for this over and over again.'<sup>26</sup>

### Creating the nucleus of the regiment: Bose and Lakshmi as proselytizers

Bose would find his twentieth century reincarnation of Rani Lakshmibai in a 28-year-old doctor, Lakshmi Swaminadhan (1914–2012). Born in Madras (today's Chennai, Tamil Nadu) on 24 October 1914 into an unconventional family, including an independent-minded and politically active mother, very much open to Western ideas but also critical of British imperialism,<sup>27</sup> Lakshmi arrived in Singapore in

<sup>17</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 53. This section follows Lakshmi's narrative of events and her recollection of Bose's address.

<sup>18</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at pp 53 ff.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p 54. NB the Rani had fought against the British in 1858.

<sup>24</sup> Bose, *supra* note 2, at p 245.

<sup>25</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 55.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p 55.

<sup>27</sup> For this paragraph, see Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at pp 1–9 (chapter 1, entitled 'Childhood and student days') and pp 11–28 (chapter 2, 'In Singapore'). See also Fay, *supra* note 3, at pp 33–49 ('Lakshmi's youth'), notably for 'K', p 43, and also pp 201, 218.

the middle of 1940 and was one of the few Indian-born women of the regiment. Her political engagement in the Singapore branch of the Indian Independence League, her privileged background that included playing sports and driving cars, her position as a gynaecologist and obstetrician whose client base included Indian migrants in Singapore, her knowledge of Tamil and Malayalam, and her tending to prisoners of war following the British debacle, made her a natural choice for a leadership position, even if this meant breaking off her relationship with her doctor friend, 'K', whom she had followed to Singapore. Bose made her the commander of the Regiment and a few months later, on 21 October 1943, appointed her as the Minister in Charge of the Women's Organisation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India).

Lakshmi had been part of the reception committee that awaited Bose's arrival in Singapore at Paya Lebar airport on Saturday 3 July.<sup>28</sup> As a 14-year-old girl, she had first seen 'the rebel and *enfant terrible* of the Congress' when she 'had gone to watch the Congress volunteers doing their parade under him', but this time Bose was in command for real.<sup>29</sup> Having attended the 4 July ceremony in the Cathay building, where Bose formally took over from veteran revolutionary and Indian Independence League Leader Rash Behari Bose (no relation), Lakshmi also closely followed Bose's other public appearances. In particular, his Friday 9 July address, in which he had repeatedly stressed the need to form the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, had left her unsettled:

'I spent a sleepless night after this rally as I kept thinking of a women's regiment, wondering if it could ever be done. So far I had found little enthusiasm among Indian women for the Independence movement. Women of the middle and lower classes were mostly conservative, almost feudal in their outlook. But I was not the only one who had spent a sleepless night over this problem.'<sup>30</sup>

Indeed, '[e]arly next morning [she] was summoned by [Attavar] Yellappa', a Southern Indian barrister and chairman of the Singapore branch of the Indian Independence League.<sup>31</sup> Together they hatched a plan as to how to make the regiment come alive: Dr Lakshmi was to mobilize women for the IIL's women's rally to be held two days later, on Monday 12 July, with '[t]he highlight [being] a women's guard of honour that would present arms to Netaji'.<sup>32</sup> Finding enough volunteers was not easy, but '[b]y searching the length and breadth of Singapore we managed to collect 20 women willing to be trained to present arms'.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at pp 47 ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 48 ff. It is interesting that she does not mention the female section of the Bengali Volunteers.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p 55 for 'Early next morning'; for Yellappa's background, see Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 201; for 'Attavar', see Sengupta, *supra* note 11, at p 204.

<sup>32</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at pp 55 ff. 'Netaji', a compound made of the noun *netā* [leader] and the honorific suffix *ji*, is the rough equivalent of the German *Führer* or the Italian *Duce*, but the suffix gives it a more endearing twist. Bose, *supra* note 2, at p 209, states that it was his paternal grand-uncle's followers in wartime Germany who had come up with this honorific title, which 'is a very Indian form of expressing affection mingled with honour'. The glossary in Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 550, translates *netaji* as 'beloved and respected leader'. Unlike Hitler or Mussolini, Bose stood for liberation from imperial rule and also made it very clear what he thought of Hitler's racial policies.

<sup>33</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 56. The 'we' refers to Mrs Chidambaram, the chairwoman of the IIL's women's section; see Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 216.

In the afternoon of the same day, the 20 women, still dressed in saris, assembled for three hours to 'be drilled into how to present arms with the heavy .303 [Enfield] rifles the INA had'.<sup>34</sup> Instructed 'by two experienced NCOs', the volunteers first learned about the different parts of the rifles and then underwent rigorous drilling on 'how to present arms'.<sup>35</sup> A further three hours of rigorous drilling took place 'the next morning till our arms ached as never before'.<sup>36</sup> 'Nevertheless, we were able to click our rifles smartly and present arms when Netaji arrived.'<sup>37</sup> The women's guard 'came as a complete and pleasant surprise' to Bose because '[t]his part of the programme had been kept secret from him'.<sup>38</sup> As in the previous rallies, he stressed 'how he was only continuing with the Indian tradition of women fighting shoulder to shoulder with men in the independence struggle'.<sup>39</sup>

'[T]he nucleus of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment had [thus] been formed with these 20 women.'<sup>40</sup> The next day, Tuesday 13, IIL branch chairman 'Yellappa came over and said that Netaji wanted to meet me and discuss details regarding the Rani of Jhansi Regiment'.<sup>41</sup> Lakshmi 'was thrilled at the honour but also slightly apprehensive because I knew that I would now have to make a complete break with my old life,' because it would most likely mean breaking up with 'K', with whom she operated the clinic in Geylang and a more recently opened one in the centre, 'and embrace [a life] of adventure and danger'.<sup>42</sup> 'However,' she 'had been waiting for just such an involvement so I brushed aside all my fears'.<sup>43</sup>

In the evening, Lakshmi went to Bose's official residence in Meyer Road, a massive two-storey beach-front building on Singapore's east coast, for an informal interview 'that went on for three hours'.<sup>44</sup> Bose said that 'he had great faith in women and felt that, given the opportunity, there was nothing they were not capable of doing'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, 'men and women were two equal halves of a whole'.<sup>46</sup> Therefore '[h]e believed that in the fight for independence women should not remain spectators,' and instead they 'should play a positive role'.<sup>47</sup> The benefits

<sup>34</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 56. For the Enfields, see Lebra, *supra* note 7, at p 72. The location of the drilling is not indicated.

<sup>35</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 56.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56. The guard of honour appears to have been staged in the Bras Basah Road area, with the women looking towards Stamford Road, Bras Basah Road behind their backs, with Waterloo Street (which at the time extended to Stamford Road) to their left, and the old Indian prison building at the corner of Bencoolen Street/Bras Basah Road slightly behind to their right. See first photo in Lebra, *supra* note 7, in between pp xvi and 1.

<sup>38</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 56.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p 57. It is interesting that Lakshmi's memoirs do not mention any of the Singapore recruits by name. This is in contrast to some of her top recruits from Malaya and Burma.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p 57. According to Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 217, it was John [Aloysius] Thivy who was sent by Bose to ask whether she was willing to lead the regiment, whereas Thivy and Yellappa had suggested her to him. Thivy was a London-trained lawyer, well acquainted with Lakshmi's family in Madras, and practising in Ipoh at the time of the Japanese onslaught on Malaya.

<sup>42</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 57. For information on clinics and 'K', see Fay, *supra* note 3, at pp 201, 218.

<sup>43</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 57.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 57 ff. Due to land reclamations, today's Meyer Road is located a little more than half a mile from the East Coast. The bungalow has since given way to a condominium, the Atria at Meyer Road. For the latter, see Sengupta, *supra* note 11, photos between pp 134 and 135. For a description of the 'handsome building', see Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 217.

<sup>45</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 57.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p 57.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p 57.



for women in playing such a role were twofold, as Bose linked the liberation of India with the ‘end [of] our own oppression and subjugation by men’.<sup>48</sup> This was because ‘[w]e would be in a position to demand and obtain equal rights and no longer be the exploited sex’.<sup>49</sup> Bose appears to have done most of the talking, also warning Dr Lakshmi ‘of the dangers ahead,’ and eventually ‘asked me if I would be prepared to take up the command of the Rani Jhansi [*sic*] Regiment,’ upon which ‘[I] gave him my unconditional support’.<sup>50</sup> The interview concluded with Bose ‘telling me that I should start my duties the next day’.<sup>51</sup> ‘I would be given an office at headquarters and from there I should start planning the raising of the Rani Jhansi Regiment.’<sup>52</sup> Thus began the multiplication of the Ranis.

### **Multiplying the Ranis**

‘The next morning, [Wednesday] 14 July, 1943, at 8 a.m., I found a staff car at my door to take me to the office.’<sup>53</sup> It is interesting that Dr Lakshmi mentions, unlike probably most autobiographers, that ‘[o]nce I got there, I did not know what to do next!’ but this admission also accentuates the ‘usual thoughtfulness’ of ‘Netaji’ in the next sentence, who ‘sent [her] his personal secretary, Abid Hassan, to discuss matters’.<sup>54</sup> Following the advice of Bose’s trusted lieutenant, Dr Lakshmi started the project of producing Ranis by ‘visiting the homes’ of ‘the women who had taken part in the guard of honour’.<sup>55</sup> With some disappointment, she notes that ‘[o]nly 15 of the 20 volunteered to join; the others were prevented from doing so either because they had small children or dependents whom they had to support by working full time’.<sup>56</sup> ‘They were most disappointed.’<sup>57</sup>

With no training ground of their own yet, ‘the 15 recruits [...] started part-time training in a maidan<sup>58</sup> within the Indian Independence League grounds....for a few hours each afternoon’, with Dr Lakshmi joining them whenever she could.<sup>59</sup> The ‘instructors were specially selected by Netaji who impressed upon them the need for enforcing military discipline without the help of barrack-room language or corporal punishment’.<sup>60</sup> They lived up to Bose’s high expectations and made the volunteers feel welcome by accepting them as ‘a part of the Indian National Army’; they were also the ones who started referring to the women as the ‘Ranis’.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p 57.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p 57.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, pp 57 ff.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p 58.

<sup>58</sup> A ‘maidan’ (from Urdu) is a multipurpose open field that can be used for meetings, sports, as a parade ground, marketplace or esplanade.

<sup>59</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at pp 58 ff; ‘for a few hours...’; Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 218. Fay also suggests that training did not begin until Monday 19 July, by which time the number of volunteers had already increased to 50. The IIL headquarters were at Chancery Lane; see Sengupta, *supra* note 11, photo between pp 134 and 135.

<sup>60</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 58.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, pp 58 ff. It is not clear from the sources whether this initial group of ‘part-time’ Ranis received the same ‘basic training’ as the ‘full-time’ Ranis who lived in the Rani of Jhansi Camp that was opened in late October. Likewise, it is unclear whether the part-time Ranis, who were living at home, later moved into the camp.

Throughout the rest of 'July and August,' Lakshmi's 'time was taken up with military training and organising the women's section at headquarters,' while the initial number of 15 Ranis 'had grown to nearly a hundred and there were many more applications from girls on the [Malayan] mainland'.<sup>62</sup> The increasing number of Ranis and the prospect of getting even more from Malaya necessitated finding 'adequate grounds to house the regiment,' but in the absence of Bose, the Japanese 'were most un-cooperative almost to the extent of obstructing my work'.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, Bose had gone on a fund-raising tour, for he needed the financial, political and manpower support of the Indian communities in South East and East Asia in order to make the INA less dependent on the Japanese and also to show that the Provisional Government of India, which he was working towards, had a popular base.<sup>64</sup>

In fact, the incoming applications to join the Rani of Jhansi Regiment were at least partially due to Bose's touring of the region. Broadcasts, newspapers and the local branches of the Indian Independence League announced his arrival and created a sense of expectation, while the rallies and his speeches left such a strong impression that people would volunteer themselves or their possessions for the liberation of India. In Kuala Lumpur, 17-year-old Janaki Davar, whose father had become a successful dairy farm owner since migrating from southern India in 1911, had read about Bose's call for the formation of a women's regiment in Bose's 'English-language newspaper'.<sup>65</sup> The day of Bose's widely announced appearance in Kuala Lumpur, knowing that her mother would forbid it, she 'made [the cook] cover for me, got out my bicycle, and went' to attend the rally at the *padang* of the Selangor Club (today's Merdeka Square).<sup>66</sup> Leaving her bicycle in a ditch, Janaki 'walked to the platform where Bose was speaking'.<sup>67</sup> She was so moved by Bose's speech 'in Hindustani and also in English,' and his appeal to fight for the liberty of India that 'the feeling grew in me that I must join'.<sup>68</sup>

Bose called for the offering of 'money, jewelry, anything they had', and Janaki did not hesitate and 'went up, took off the earrings I was wearing, and put them into his hand'.<sup>69</sup> A 'cameraman' was there who 'took a picture of me doing this'.<sup>70</sup> Not knowing how to tell her parents about the 'loss' of her two earrings, she stole her way back home by skipping family dinner and went to bed on an empty stomach.<sup>71</sup> The next morning at breakfast, Janaki found her father hidden behind the newspaper with last night's photograph facing her, but it was her older sister Papatthi who could not help but excitedly draw her mother's attention to it.<sup>72</sup> Janaki's mother was very angry and wanted to hit her, whereas her father was more 'broadminded'.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p 59.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p 59.

<sup>64</sup> Fay, *supra* note 3, at pp 214 ff.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p 219. Janaki's account is Fay's reconstruction of an interview with Janaki Athi Nahappan in Calcutta in January 1989; see p 585, note 6.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p 219. 'Padang' is the Malay equivalent of 'maidan': an open, multipurpose field.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p 219. Sengupta, *supra* note 11, at p 218, mentions that the speech was translated into Tamil.

<sup>68</sup> Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 219.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p 219. Sengupta, *supra* note 11, at p 218, who interviewed Janaki in September 2011, mentions that Janaki also gave Bose her necklace.

<sup>70</sup> Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 219.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p 219.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p 220.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p 220.

About 100 miles north of Kuala Lumpur, Bose also left an indelible mark on many of those who witnessed his rally in Ipoh at the *padang* of the Ipoh Club.<sup>74</sup> Among those who attended was the entire family of Nancy Navarednam, a Christian widowed schoolteacher in British service who lived in a government property in Ipoh's Green Town area and whose background suggested that she would be opposed to Bose's call to liberate India from the British. She was consequently shocked when her two youngest daughters, Ponnammah Ruth (b 1925) and Rasammah Naomi (b 1927), both of them roused by Bose's 'passionate appeal for volunteers', wanted to join the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.<sup>75</sup> 'We regarded our sacrifices to be far more important for India than our sheltered lives.'<sup>76</sup> Despite imploring their mother for weeks for permission, Mrs Navarednam was 'aghast' and 'not even slightly inclined into permitting her two youngest children to join the Regiment'.<sup>77</sup> Rasammah notes that the situation was not different for other female volunteers because '[i]n each and every case there was strong opposition from the parents and relatives,' for whom '[i]t was too shocking that young people – girls and women in particular, should leave the safe confines of their homes [...] in this our war for the freedom of India'.<sup>78</sup>

### **Dr Lakshmi harvests volunteers**

While Bose had clearly planted the seeds for the Rani of Jhansi Regiment during his tour of the Malayan peninsula, Lakshmi would play a crucial role in reaping the harvest of those women and girls who had declared their commitment to join the regiment. While making them donate their jewellery was relatively easy, enticing them to volunteer was already more difficult, and actually making them leave behind their previous lives as daughters, wives and mothers was a real challenge, particularly if parental consent was required. This necessitated a more institutionalized effort and door-to-door follow-up, such as Lakshmi had already practised in Singapore when she mobilized the female guard of honour on 12 July and the first 100 or so women after she had been formally put in charge by Bose.

Hence during the month of September, Lakshmi went up to Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Ipoh<sup>79</sup> in order to 'convince all those who had volunteered that we meant business and that a camp would be started as soon as Netaji [had] returned' to Singapore.<sup>80</sup> She even made house visits to convince concerned parents to put their young daughters under her command.<sup>81</sup> This attention to detail and her perseverance, coupled with her experience of house visits as a doctor and her winning personality, allowed her to 'g[e]t some of my most outstanding recruits who later became officers in the Regiment'.<sup>82</sup>

In Kuala Lumpur, Janaki Davar used the opportunity of Lakshmi's presence to persuade her father, who had a friend at the local IIL office, to invite her to tea.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Gopinath, *supra* note 10, at p 62.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 46–47. Rasammah was the youngest of six children; see p 17.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p 63.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p 63.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 62 ff.

<sup>79</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 59.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p 59. It is not clear how many days she spent on the peninsula.

<sup>81</sup> Lebra, *supra* note 7, at p 76.

<sup>82</sup> Sahgal *supra* note 7, at p 59.

<sup>83</sup> Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 220.

Lakshmi accepted Rengasamy Davar's invitation and left him 'terribly impressed'.<sup>84</sup> Fearing that her father might change his mind later, Janaki immediately asked him to provide his parental consent on the 'application form' that she had already filled out.<sup>85</sup> As Davar was an important member of the Indian community in Kuala Lumpur, Janaki suggests that the paternal approval made it easier for other girls 'to go too'.<sup>86</sup> In Kuala Lumpur, [albeit in early October] Lakshmi also won over a Mrs Satyavati Thevar, 'who was in her early forties and had been headmistress of a girls school.....to join me as a second-in-command'.<sup>87</sup>

In Ipoh, she won over 'the Navaratnam sisters, Ponnamma and Rosamma, and also Mrs. Blanche Thevar and Mrs. Das'.<sup>88</sup> Rasammah notes that it was '[a]fter the meeting with this vibrant, dynamic, dedicated leader' that the 'families who were opposed to their daughters being recruited' finally 'were persuaded to release their young fledglings'.<sup>89</sup> Even then, Rasammah's and Ponnammah's four older 'brothers and sisters continued to dissuade us' and their mother was 'torn', all contributing to a 'painful, agonising anxiety' that starkly contrasted with the two sisters' 'exuberant enthusiasm'.<sup>90</sup> What really made a difference during the long weeks prior to departure for Singapore was that the 'parents of girls who were also to join the Regiment did meet on a few occasions and in a real sense this reinforced them in a profoundly positive manner'.<sup>91</sup> Of equal importance was the 'on-going information on the plans for the INA from the bulletins and media,' which 'helped dispel doubts and parents were convinced that the call for the freedom of India did demand sacrifice and this they were willing to accept'.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

When Subhas Chandra Bose formally opened the Rani of Jhansi Camp in Singapore's Waterloo Street on 22 October 1943, he had realized a dream that arguably dated back at least to the Calcutta Congress of 1928 and the women's section of the Bengali Volunteers.<sup>93</sup> In Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan, recently promoted to Captain Lakshmi,<sup>94</sup> he had found an outstanding leader who had not only assembled the first 20 women to stand guard of honour on 12 July, but who, since her appointment on 13 July, had worked tirelessly to increase the initial nucleus to 156 women, and had also built up the Rani of Jhansi Camp to accommodate up to 500 recruits.

Together they had formed a formidable team. While Lakshmi was busy in Singapore expanding the initial nucleus of 15 women to nearly 100 who were training

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p 220.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p 220.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p 220.

<sup>87</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 60; for Satyavati, see Sengupta, *supra* note 11, at p 212.

<sup>88</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 60.

<sup>89</sup> Gopinath, *supra* note 10, at p 63.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p 63.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p 63.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p 63.

<sup>93</sup> The Rani of Jhansi camp occupied the playing field [*padang*] of the Saint Joseph's Institution (today's Singapore Arts Museum). This parcel of land, then situated between Bras Basah Road, Waterloo Street, Stamford Road and Queen Street, has since made way for the library of the Singapore Management University (SMU) and parts of SMU's Campus Green. In the process, the final stretch of Waterloo Street has disappeared.

<sup>94</sup> Fay, *supra* note 3, at p 221.

part-time, Bose's touring of the mainland had roused in many more girls and women a desire to step forward in order to participate in the liberation of India, even though most of them had never set foot on Indian soil. Yet again, it was Lakshmi's tour of the mainland in September that proved crucial in this because it convinced anxious parents to sign the parental consent form and convinced others that the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was set on fulfilling its aims. This marked a radical departure from the past when Indian migrant fathers and husbands had called for the womenfolk to follow them to their overseas places of work, whereas now it was girls and women asking for permission to leave their families for the sake of a larger cause.

The Ranis that Bose and Captain Lakshmi, who was walking to his right, were inspecting that evening also matched his ideals of a more egalitarian and non-communal India: one where merit rather than ethnicity, religion, class, caste, language or gender were key and in which communal differences could be overcome by training, eating and living together. The momentum had to be sustained by providing full-time training, as Bose must have been aware that the tides of war were tilting against his ambitious plan to invade India. On 30 March 1944, Dr Lakshmi's 'proudest day',<sup>95</sup> the regiment's first passing-out parade celebrated the first batch of officers in Singapore. The first Ranis from the Singapore camp, including Janaki and Papathi Davar from Kuala Lumpur and Rasammah and Ponnammah Navarednam from Ipoh, were soon on their way to Burma via the infamous Death Railway.

<sup>95</sup> Sahgal, *supra* note 7, at p 77.