

Book Review

Empowered Warriors: Women, Freedom, and the Indian National Army

Lt. Asha Sahay Choudhry, *The War Diary of Asha-san: From Tokyo to Netaji's Indian National Army*, translated by Tanvi Srivastava. Delhi: Harper Collins, 2022, 225 p, INR 599

Vera Hildebrand, *Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment*, Delhi: Harper Collins, 2016, 321 p, INR 699

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Reviewer Profile

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Empowered Warriors: Women, Freedom, and the Indian National Army

Anita Anand

Eighty years ago, the impossible happened. In Singapore, under the eye of Subhas Chandra Bose, a freedom fighter from India, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR) an all-women's infantry regiment was raised. Two years later, it was disbanded. How did this come about? What prompted this phenomenon and what happened to the women who were part of this infantry?

Two books of very different genres explore this occurrence and partly answer these questions. *Women at War: Subhas Chandra Bose and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment* by Vera Hildebrand and *The War Diary of Asha-san: From Tokyo to Netaji's Indian National Army* by Lt. Asha Sahay Choudhry (translated by Tanvi Srivastava) - are fascinating reads.

Danish born Hildebrand, with a doctorate in Indian history and culture living in India in the early 2000s observed that Indian women in the workforce were competent and 'bossy', but at home acquiesced to the men in their families. This was in contrast to her home country Denmark, where there was more equality between men and women, in and outside the home. She got interested in studying this and as part of her research stumbled upon the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (RJR). She writes of her surprised fascination at the existence of the first all-female combat regiment which led her to investigate and reconstruct the story of the RJR. At that time there was no women's regiment in combat, not even in Israel¹. The United States had no women in combat.

As part of her research Hildebrand explored Indian history, culture, and religion. It took her eight years to write the book and that intensive engagement is reflected in the depth of research. The book and chapters include the history of women in India and Indian diaspora, a detailed profile of Subhas Chandra Bose, the politics between Mahatma Gandhi and Bose over the freedom struggle, Bose and women, the Indian Freedom Movement in Malay and Burma prior to the arrival of Bose, Bose in South-east Asia, Creation and mission of the RJR, Captain Lakshmi, Bose and the recruitment of the RJR, Singapore and RJR preparation for war, daily routines of the Ranis, the RJR in Rangoon and Maymyo, the varying accounts of the RJR, and final reflections on Subhas Chandra Bose and the RJR.

Asha Sahay Choudhry, as a member of the RJR, kept an intimate record in a diary that spans the years 1943 to 1947; the coming of age of a young woman against the cataclysmic backdrop of world changing events. The Diary is a genre that intimately captures the global in the local as Asha-san seeks to emotionally understand her Japanese-Indian – nationalist diaspora life space during the war years. In three parts, the Diary includes the events in the Sahay family (her parents

¹ Editor's note: The state of Israel came into being in 1948.

and siblings), the freedom movement in and outside India, the RJR, and her role in it. Choudhry wrote her diary in Japanese, on scraps of paper, notebooks and whatever was available during the troubled and scarce war years. She translated the Japanese version of her diary into Hindi with the assistance of her parents and her Hindi professor when she returned to India in 1947. It was serialized in the Hindi magazine *Dharmayug*, to which my mother subscribed, when I was growing up. This book in English is translated by her grandson's wife, Tanvi Srivastava.

Choudhry's father was Anand Mohan Sahay, a freedom fighter and revolutionary based in Japan since 1923. He was Bose's political adviser and a cabinet member of the Provisional Government of *Azad Hind* (Independent India, a party formed by Bose) and closely associated with the development of the Azad Hind governance structure and its administration in the Andamans and Nicobar Islands and Burma. Her mother was Sati Sen Sahay. Her parents were married in Kolkata (then Calcutta), India in 1927. While her husband was busy with his political and revolutionary activities, Sati Sahay helped to publish the English Japanese journal *Voices of India* and worked with Indian women in Japan to spread the message of nationalism. She also designed the currency notes of the Azad Hind Government, having studied fine arts at Shantiniketan, the University created by Rabindranath Tagore.

Choudhry was born in Tokyo in 1928 and named Asha Bharati (Asha for hope and Bharati for the land of Bharat and the longed-for freedom her parents were fighting for). Asha-san as she came to be known, is for the endearment dear or 'san' in Japanese. She was 17 years old when she joined the RJR.

Both books highlight the nationalist fervor of the day. In India, the possibility of freedom, of its citizens becoming independent, was a heady thought. Freedom fighters and leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, and many others fired the imagination of Indians. While their goal was India's independence, their strategies were different. Mahatma Gandhi believed in non-violence while the impatient Bose was convinced that violence was the way to get the British out of India. Towards this, he formed the Indian National Army (INA), recruiting 40,000 men and the RJR to fight the British.

From Hildebrand's study based on information from British intelligence documents, other archival records, plus personal papers of oral testimonies of the RJR, a definitive picture of the Regiment emerged. She writes, "The total number of women were about 450, most who were nurses. They never got closer than 250 miles to the front lines, and no RJR members ever engaged the enemy in combat. They received no training in compass reading or communication, didn't know how to survive in the jungle and their meals were prepared by cooks." (Hildebrand 2016, 252)

Hildebrand interviewed twenty-two Ranis (as they were called after the name of their regiment Rani Jhansi) in India, Malaysia, Singapore, and the United States. They were in their late seventies

to early nineties at the time of being interviewed. The task of tracking them down was an arduous one as many Ranis' names were different after their marriage and locating their contact details was a project in and of itself.

The RJR, the women's regiment of the Indian National Army (INA) was the first all-women regiment in the history of the Indian Army. It was created by Subhas Chandra Bose and the armed force, formed by Indian nationalists in 1942 in Southeast Asia with the aim of overthrowing the British Raj in colonial India, with Japanese assistance. Led by Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan (better known as Lakshmi Sahgal), the RJR was formed in July 1943, and composed of Indian women recruited from Southeast Asia, mostly from the Indian diaspora in Singapore and Malaya. The women were trained in military tactics, physical fitness, and marksmanship, and were deployed in Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia to fight against the British. The unit was named after Rani Lakshmi of Jhansi, a renowned Indian queen, and legendary freedom fighter, who died in battle during the 1857 rebellion against the British forces. She became an emblem of the Indian freedom movement and was seen as an embodiment of divine female power, Shakti.

Most of the women recruited into the RJR were teenage volunteers of Indian descent from Malayan rubber estates, but there also was a core of women from wealthy middle class 'nationalist' families of the Indian diaspora. Very few had ever been to India. The initial nucleus of the force was established with its training camp in Singapore with approximately a hundred and seventy cadets.

How did Bose manage to create this regiment of women? According to Hildebrand, Bose felt and said that as half of India's population are women, they should be used in the fight for its freedom, and women were equal to men. He tried to persuade women to join the Congress party and contribute to the freedom struggle and to build a new India. It is this vision that attracted women to his cause.

In creating a context to the background of the creation of the RJR, Hildebrand traces the background of Bose's family, describing it as very old-fashioned. Bose's father was much older than his mother, who was around fourteen when they got married, and he was raised in a conservative Indian upper middle-class environment. But he was a rebel in his school and college days in India, and also when he travelled to London for his studies to be eligible for joining the Indian Civil Service (ICS), a cadre designed by the British Crown to administer India. The ICS in its post-independence form, the Indian Administrative Service, still exists in India today.

"When it came to taking care of these young girls, Bose felt fatherly and protective towards them. He sent them candy and he would call them in if they were sad and talk to them. He spent a lot of time making sure they had what they needed, that they were entertained, that they were learning. He was very kind to them. They all adored him. They thought he was godlike," Hildebrand writes (239).

Captain Lakshmi Sahgal Swaminathan oversaw the RJR for the first five months, then was transferred to Burma. She was a medical doctor and a member of the INA. Hildebrand describes her as a “women’s liberator”. She was a gynecologist, and continued to practice medicine and advocate for women’s rights till the end of her life. She was 92 when Hildebrand visited her, and at that time she was very agitated about the high rate of female infanticide and that in some villages in Punjab, there were no girls.

When Hildebrand interviewed the Ranis, she asked: would you be able to kill? Some said, “I’m glad I didn’t have to make that choice.” But most of them said, “We were trained for it! Of course, we would have killed” (142). Hildebrand wonders if they knew what it would have meant to kill someone. They were never in a situation where they had to kill. “But they all told me the story of the two women who were killed while they were retreating. Everyone mentioned this story. Two of the Ranis were sitting right across from the women who were killed, and all these years later they were still affected by it. I think they would have been very affected had they killed somebody in combat” (178).

Some of the Ranis Hildebrand interviewed said, “Those were the two best years of my life.” When she queried them about their lives and achievements, and said, “You had a great job, your husband, your children”, their reply was prompt. “Yes, those are all important,” they said, “but those were the best years of my life. I was happy, I was proud of myself, I was proud of my country” (Hildebrand 2016, 239).

The RJR training in Singapore began in October 1943. They underwent military and combat training with drills, route marches as well as weapons training in rifles, hand grenades, and bayonet charges. Later, a number of the cadets were chosen for more advanced training in jungle warfare in Burma. The Regiment had its first passing out parade at the Singapore training camp of five hundred troops on March 30, 1944. When the capital of Burma, Rangoon fell, the Azad Hind government and Bose withdrew, and the troops originating in Burma were disbanded. The remainder of the RJR left along with the retreating Japanese forces on foot, and when available on mechanized transport. During the retreat, the RJR unit suffered Allied air attacks from the Burmese resistance forces. The total number of casualties is not known. The unit later disbanded.

Choudhry makes an entry in her diary on May 1945:

I go to the Rani Jhansi camp and meet a group of sisters who have just returned from Burma. They are exhausted, but still inspired. They are impatient to return to Imphal... They faced many difficulties and obstacles during their journey. They had to be without water for five days; some Ranis were suffering from malaria yet continued to walk for halfway through their journey their truck was burned down. A jeep was sent to bring back the sick Ranis and

Netaji. Netaji's order was simple – till there is an INA brother, no sister should face harm of any kind. As Ranis our dream differed. We wished to lose our lives so that our brothers could live forever. (Srivastava 2022, 90-91).

Through the diary Choudhry's voice is like a teenager, which she was: excited and fast paced. Extremely attached to her parents, especially her father, the pages are full of him and his activities. And of course, Netaji. The diary, as to be expected, is in first person.

Hildebrand writes that the RJR remains an important symbol of women's participation in the struggle for Indian independence, and its legacy has inspired generations of women in India and beyond. However, looking at the short-lived excitement of the members of the Regiment, it is a bit like what Indian women have faced and are facing, even today. With every victory there are setbacks, promises made and not kept, and disappointments. Girls and women are continuously told they can be anything they want, but there are severe obstacles and setbacks to their dreams and aspirations. The ecosystem needed to support the women is not there. This is frustrating and women are often angry, resentful, and frustrated, unable to manage the dual roles expected of them. Their mental and physical health is affected. Women are still seen as home makers, with primary responsibility to take care of the family and home.

In the chapter on Final Reflections Hildebrand writes,

In his speech at the opening of the Singapore camp in October 1943 Bose stressed the commitment of the assembled Ranis gave him hope for the future of Indian women. But despite improvements in the status of women over succeeding decades, gender equality issues remain conspicuous in contemporary India to even a casual observer. Such factors as the traditional assumption of male dominance, the archaic caste system and religious practices continue to pose barriers to Indian gender equity (Hildebrand 2016, 126-7).

In the present-day context, essential elements of gender equity are women's agency and autonomy. Agency is about women's individual choice and action. It refers to the capacity to act and make choices in pursuit of one's goals, while also acknowledging the social and cultural contexts that shape those choices. Autonomy refers to the ability to make decisions and act independently, without external influence or control. It is often associated with individual freedom and self-determination. Both autonomy and agency involve a degree of self-direction.

Did the Ranis have agency and autonomy? Lets' start with agency. It would seem that Ranis did have some level of agency, with a caveat. While they exercised choice in signing up for the RJR (with their parent's consent), they were heavily influenced by the freedom movement in India. As women in diaspora, many had never been to India. When Subhas Chandra Bose came to them, they were young and impressionable, fired with the idea of fighting for India's freedom. The

women came from families with ties to India and were tied to their families and communities. In Bose they saw a leader, charming, charismatic and a visionary. He inspired them to give their lives for the freedom movement.

In terms of autonomy, were the Ranis controlled by or influenced by others around them? It is hard to tell but what is clear is that they were caught up in the idea of the freedom movement and wanted to play a part. Like Choudhry they were definitely influenced by members of their family and by Bose.

The Ranis lived in a time and environment which was sexist and patriarchal. Bose opened doors for them and in Bose's speeches it is evident that he saw them as much more than mere women and second-class citizens. As for the Ranis, the diary pages of Choudhry and Hildebrand's interviews with them make it clear that the Ranis regarded Bose as a God. The love and attention he showered on them is something they had not experienced. This feeling on the part of the Ranis is not surprising among women with little agency. Their socialization is to look up to the males in the family, such as grandfathers, fathers, husbands and brothers.

It is possible that the Ranis' experience encouraged some self-discovery, self-definition, and self-direction and through this they could identify beliefs, desires and projects that promoted their own flourishing and that of others, and in the process disavow beliefs, desires, and projects that they deemed unfair and detrimental.

In the final entry in her diary of August 2, 1947, Choudhury writes,

In August 1945, I was a newly commissioned lieutenant in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army. I was anxious and eager to reach the frontline as soon as possible, but it was not in my fate to look at the enemy in the eye. My rifle did not fire any bullets, my bayonet did not slash the arteries of any enemies. An entire organization – a structure that Netaji, Papa, and countless other brave patriots had built over the years – fell apart in a matter of weeks. First with the atom bombs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Then the Japanese surrender. Then the death of Netaji. My war ended before it began. (Srivastava 2022, 166)

However short lived the RJR was, it clearly fired the imagination of the young women, and they were probably never the same again. In whatever future endeavor their lives took, they were substantial people, with some level of agency. Hildebrand's interviews with the aged Ranis suggest this.

The two books are good for readers interested in history of the freedom movement in India, the Rani Jansi Regiment, and autobiographical diaries. Hildebrand's book is a work of deep research. It is engaging, analytical and gives a very strong flavor of what was happening in India and the

sub-continent during those years. Choudhry's is a lighter read, deeply personal and reveals how she, with her teenager eyes, viewed her world.

Both books are a valuable reminder of how movements – freedom and otherwise – need to be designed and implemented strategically, keeping in mind the reality of the times. The Indian freedom movement encouraged women to come out of their homes and work side by side with men. After Independence, however, they went back to home and hearth. The RJR was disbanded as the INA failed and the young women went back to their lives. This is true for wars in general. When men go away, it's the women who fill their jobs. When the men return the women return home. In both the freedom movement and the RJR, women were not at the center of planning or execution. But the excitement and the sense of empowerment that women experienced is not to be dismissed. It would have changed them and made them more substantial people. However, the equality that Bose dreamed of was just a dream. Till today, women in India continue to struggle to gain rightful status in every section of life. Wars do not empower women and nor does their participation in them. The glorification of women in war, side by side with men, bearing arms, is retrograde.

References

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