

crimination and whether or not the institution had non-discrimination policies – are audible on the tape recordings of the interviews. Those women who did speak on sensitive issues, such as corruption, or sexual harassment did so in whispered confidences. Some interviewees even refused to be recorded, so very good notes had to be taken, though the capturing of the silences on specific questions proved particularly challenging.

On a more positive note, several of the women, especially in the PNTL, spoke articulately and openly on their conditions of work, strategically identifying this research project as an opportunity to express their views, and to initiate reform within their institutions. Additionally, during a workshop that was part of the research project, F-FDTL and PNTL women spoke up. In this public forum, they articulated their aspirations on defence (respectively police) reform and gender and identified key problems within their institutions, such as discrimination and corruption in the Border Patrol Unit. For example, 33 female Border Patrol Unit members had been summarily dismissed by their Commander on grounds of being female and hence unsuitable for work in the border region, though it is likely to have been a pretext for him to protect lucrative moonlighting opportunities such as smuggling, human trafficking (e.g. of young Timorese girls to Indonesian officers), and other illegal activities.

Why female underwear is more important than military hardware

It is not inevitable that the 21st century's first new nation should continue to reproduce the same mistakes in DDR and SSR – including gendered ones – that have occurred in other countries. Despite considerable progress in understanding that

Some key findings and analysis

1. Women in both the PNTL and F-FDTL spoke of the serious need for reform in terms of formation and promotion. Formation is perceived as too short (e.g. police officer training is only three months long). Promotion and career development opportunities were also found lacking, and there was a strong sense that male counterparts were advantaged. Without a process of review and reform, women will continue to be stuck in the lower ranks, unable to benefit from more training or to participate in decision-making processes.
2. Morale is low due to unequal access to resources. This is due to strongly centripetal centre-periphery relations – it is not clear whether this affects women differently than men – and due to gender. Women PNTL from the rural districts feel 'inferior' when they come to Dili, as their four-year old uniform is fraying in comparison to the uniforms of their colleagues in the capital. Besides not getting the proper uniforms, boots, and other equipment to conduct their work effectively, women PNTL and F-FDTL in the districts also do not have much access to training programmes, workshops, and most importantly, open access to information. Many of the problems they face arise because so much goes on behind closed doors.
3. Sexual harassment within the PNTL and F-FDTL is, according to a Secretary of State for Security, "more widespread than we think". A key problem appears to be instilling a culture of non-tolerance by taking disciplinary measures against deviant personnel. In 2003, for instance, a PNTL Commander was investigated for serious misconduct towards 6 female PNTL colleagues, having told them that they would have to sleep with him if they wanted to get promoted. The issue was deemed resolved when the commander was transferred to another city, where he repeated the same pattern of sexual harassment.
4. There is an institutional lack of gender awareness, which may be due to the purposefully gender-blind ideology of the resistance struggle, combined with a lack of resources. China, for example, generously provided uniforms to the F-FDTL, with women receiving exactly the same uniforms and underwear than their male counterparts. Given the context that "everyone is treated as a male, with a male body", this was paradoxically not viewed as "discrimination" by the women we interviewed, though the problem persists.
5. Women's health issues, including untreated physical wounds and psychosocial trauma, e.g. related to the 2006 violence and the absence of any medical and/or counselling support, are further important issues that need to be addressed. According to PNTL Human Resources, about 121 male and female police personnel are victims of the 2006 crisis, and 29 PNTL personnel were wounded. Among the female wounded, some had not been operated on and still had potentially carcinogenic bullets in their bodies. Others had suffered from such serious mental conditions – "I was afraid I would go insane" – that they sought medical treatment at the hospital. This was done on their own initiative, as the PNTL did not offer any psychosocial counselling or support for them.

gender matters, implementation is difficult in post-conflict societies, which often lack the institutional knowledge and the resources, and whose elites may have other priorities.

Our report's recommendations include exploring and creating more inclusive, participatory, and consultative paths. There is a need to engender democratic spaces, not just within the PNTL and the F-FDTL, but by setting up a parallel exemplary representative gender 'balance' in model institutions, such as the government, the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT) and the United Nations Police (UNPOL). It is time to get out of the conventional boxes on peace-keeping, peace-building and peace-making, and engage with local knowledge and indigenous belief systems and practices. Progress cannot be made by relying on the rule of external experts and their generic 'one-size-fits-all' formulas. It is also time to create and pro-actively promote non-discrimination policies within the PNTL and F-FDTL, and to transform the mentality of senior-level staff and officials. This can be done through public education programmes, creative approaches, discussions, briefings, and by other means necessary.

All of the above goals could be achieved at relatively low cost and result in the boosting of East Timor's human and state security. In contrast, current attempts at Security Sector Reform, in particular the ambitious Defence Plan 2020 (Forsa 2020) suggest that high-level government officials and their 'expert advisors' prefer a costly hardware-heavy defence and security approach at a time when professional police work is seriously hampered by mundane things such as a lack of filing cabinets, and female morale is sapped by the delivery of 'one-size-fits-all' male underwear.⁷

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Notes

- 1 See Sue Blackburn's contribution to this IIAS Newsletter for a discussion of DDR in Cambodia and East Timor.
- 2 The study was commissioned by the National Commission on Research and Development, by the Sector Working Group on Justice, Defence, and Security. The views expressed in this article are my own.
- 3 PNTL Human Resources, respectively F-FDTL Human Resources.
- 4 See for example, "Report on the Monitoring of the State of Siege and Emergency: February to April 2008," Provedor for Human Rights and Justice, Caicoli, Dili, Timor Leste, 2008.
- 5 *Simbolo de afirmasaun da independencia, simbolo de orgulho.*
- 6 See for example the UN Commission on Investigation Report (Col) on the 2006 crisis.
- 7 It emphasises the need for high-tech equipment and military, naval, coastguard resources, eventually also aerial hardware, to guard the 1.15 mio strong nation's most valuable resource in the sea, oil, even though a study by the Center for Defence Studies, King's College, London, had outlined the shortcomings of such as Security Sector Reform strategy as early as 2000.

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army (INA) is one of the most unusual and colourful female-only military units ever created. Enthusiastically initiated in Japanese-occupied Singapore in 1943 by a Bengali nationalist leader, Subhas Chandra Bose, the regiment's name was inspired by an Indian warrior queen, whereas most of the regiment's members were lower-class overseas Indians. Tobias Rettig explains that this unique and short-lived regiment was also a training ground for some of India and Malaysia's pioneering post-independence female leaders and activists.

Warrior queens:

the Rani of Jhansi Regiment

TOBIAS RETTIG

In early 1942, concerned about British-controlled India, the Japanese established the male-only Indian National Army (INA), made up of Indian soldiers unhappy with British colonial rule and those who just wanted to escape the harsh prisoner-of-war conditions. Within a year, however, it was disbanded due to tensions within the ranks and with the Japanese.

It was not until the arrival in Singapore of Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945), the Bengali nationalist and former Indian Congress leader, that the INA was revived from mid-1943. Bose reached out to the overseas Indian community and conceived of a female-only regiment. Unlike Gandhi or Nehru, he refused to play loyal opposition, advocating alignment with the leading Axis powers and violent anti-colonial struggle. Unlike his conservative fascist patrons in Berlin and Tokyo, his nationalism included a violent feminism which was not just the product of circumstance or a desire to mobilise the INA and local Indians for his political goal, but "the child [of his] psyche, personality, and politics" (Hills/Silverman 1993).

"... I want ... a unit of brave Indian women to form a death-defying Regiment who will wield the sword which Rani of Jhansi wielded in India's First War of Independence in 1857."¹

Subhas Chandra Bose, speaking at Singapore's Padang, 9 July 1943.

The Rani of Jhansi as role model

Rather than drawing on India's rich collective (sub-)conscious with several goddesses known for their use of violence, Bose opted for a real woman of flesh and blood as his role model. In fact, Lakshmibai, the Rani (Queen) of the princely state of Jhansi (c. 1828–1858), had led her subjects against the British during the 1857-8 Indian Rebellion, thus demonstrating that

women could assume political and military leadership positions in spite of the custom of *pardah* (sexual segregation). Although Lakshmibai's decision to take up arms against the British had primarily been motivated by local grievances and dynastic reasons, her anti-colonialism could easily be given a subcontinental, nationalistic meaning that would appeal to 20th century audiences.

In 1854, the East India Company had taken over her late husband's territory in central North India on the grounds of not having produced a male heir, even though the Rani and the Raja had, in line with Indian tradition, adopted a distant relative in 1853. Unlike other widows before her, the well-educated Rani first exhausted all legal options against the dispossession before deciding on violent action to reclaim her territories. The 1857 Sepoy Mutiny provided the perfect environment. The fact that she was considered a 'tomboy' in her youth, trained in the martial arts, certainly facilitated her decision. The Rani's courageous and competent resistance, as well as her 17 June 1858 death on the battlefield, would only serve to increase her prestige and enduring popular appeal.



Women in today's Indian Armed Forces continue the tradition begun by the Rani of Jhansi. Photograph by Ian Cowe.

The Rani's reincarnation and multiplication

Bose would find his 20th century reincarnation of Rani Lakshmbai in a 28-year old medical doctor, Dr Lakshmi Swaminathan. Born in Madras on 24 October 1914, she arrived in Singapore in 1940 and was one of the few India-born women of the regiment. Her political engagement in the Indian Independence League (IIL), her privileged background that included playing sports and driving cars, her position as a gynaecologist and obstetrician for Indian migrants in Singapore, and her tending to prisoners of war following the British debacle, made her a natural choice for a leadership position. Bose made her the commander of the Regiment and appointed her as the Minister in Charge of Women's Organisation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India).

Dr Lakshmi immediately used her position and networks to convince 20 young women to join her and on 12 July 1943 the Regiment was born. Recruitment was not just limited to Singapore as Bose went on a fundraising tour through Rangoon, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Shanghai, Nanking and other cities. It was during one of Bose's speeches in the Selangor Club maidan in Kuala Lumpur that an Indian girl from a wealthy family, Janaky Devar (b. 1925 or 1926) was so affected by the Netaji's speech that she spontaneously took off her jewellery to demonstrate her support for his cause. Despite the initial resistance of her father, Janaky was determined to join the female regiment.² Eventually, she would be in charge of uneducated Tamil-speaking women recruited from Malaya's rubber estates and rose to second-in-command of the regiment. Among her subordinates were girls such as M.B. Mehta, who lied about their age in order to be recruited.

While many accounts emphasise the Netaji's charisma and reputation among the Indian diaspora as a major pull factor, Bose-centric accounts tend to overlook the crucial role played by Dr Lakshmi in mobilising local-born Indian women in Singapore and further up the Malay peninsula. After having mobilised the Indians in Singapore, she went to recruit in Kuala Lumpur, Penang, and Ipoh (OHD, Dr Lakshmi), making house visits to convince concerned parents to put their young daughters under her command. In Ipoh, for instance, she was invited by two Christian Indian girls, Ponnammah (b. 1925) and Rasammah Navarednam (b. 1927) to convince their mother to allow them to join the regiment (Gopinath 2007). Eventually, the regiment was made up of some 1500 women from diverse backgrounds: Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians; the well-educated and well-to-do as well as plantation workers and other immigrant groups. The majority of its members were overseas Indian, born in British Burma, British Malaya, and some volunteers even came from Shanghai, Hongkong, and Thailand. According to Dr Lakshmi, even Malay and Chinese girls volunteered but had to be rejected on nationality grounds (OHD). While the official age limit was between 18 and 28, the youngest member allegedly was 12, and about 20 ladies above the ripe old age of 45 served as uniformed cooks.

While many, like the young Janaky, were swept up in nationalistic fervour, there were also more pragmatic reasons to join. Malayan plantations had been depleted of male labour as many men had to choose between being recruited by the Japanese as forced labour or joining the INA. The women folk who were left behind were now open to the sexual predations of the remaining clerks and supervisors (Bayly/Harper 2004). Joining the INA's female regiment was a way of escaping this, but it had other benefits too. A male eye-witness from Singapore, Dr Menon (OHD) suggests that Indian women joined because they "want[ed] to get themselves safe from the hands of the Japanese" and to a place where "you get fine dress, you get fine food, you can march [...], you can keep your good health".



The Rani of Jhansi, with her adopted son on her back, riding towards her last stronghold.

Battle-readiness and fighting power

Basic military training started simultaneously in Singapore and Rangoon in late October 1943. According to Dr Lakshmi (OHD), the women got "the same training as the men". This included marches, parades, obstacle training, learning how to handle weapons, including the bayoneting of stuffed gunny sacks, and jungle warfare. About 200 women were also trained as nurses.

Despite this training, not everyone was convinced of the regiment's battle-readiness. Dr Menon (OHD) recounts that "not a single woman knew how to wield a knife properly", but later states that "they were undergoing regular training [...] and some were taught how to shoot". In contrast, a young Chinese (trainee) teacher remembers his fear whenever he and other trainees accidentally shot their football onto the neighbouring training grounds of the regiment, as the women soldiers "refused to return the thing and threatened to shoot us" (OHD, Dr Tan Ban Cheng).

Eventually, the best test for the Ranis' combat-readiness would be on the battlefield. However, Bose was initially very reluctant to deploy his female soldiers for more than just nursing purposes because he felt a particular responsibility for the regiment's women. He only relented when Dr Lakshmi and other leaders reminded him of his promise to treat them as equals and convinced him to deploy them on the ill-fated Imphal campaign of March-July 1944 during which the tide of war changed against the Japanese. Instead of a triumphant entry into Bengal, by March 1945 the regiment was on retreat to Bangkok.

The legacy

Although the Ranis had been on the losing side of the war, in the medium term they were on the right side of history, with British India gaining independence in 1947, British Burma in 1948, and British Malaya in 1957. Attempts in 1945-46 to bring to justice the (male) leaders of the INA at the Red Fort Trials in Delhi were abandoned when the British realised the popularity of the accused and the threat of mutiny. This certainly facilitated post-war transition and re-integration into civilian life, and INA members have tried to keep in touch through personal as well as institutional networks. In India, the Netaji Subhas Bose – INA Trust for INA Veterans provides an institutional rallying point, while the Kuala Lumpur based Netaji Centre provides a similar nexus since 1977 for former INA members in Malaysia.

With regard to the roughly 1500 Ranis, the post-independence careers of its leaders are easier to track than those of its rank and file. Lakshmi Swaminathan returned to India, married a high-ranking INA member, Colonel Prem Kumar Sahgal, and resumed her practice as a doctor. In 1971, she embarked on a political career, joining the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which she would represent in the Upper House of Parliament. In 1998, she was one of four recipients of India's second highest civilian order and, in 2002, she unsuccessfully ran for the Presidency.

The Ranis' second-in-command, Captain Janaki Devar, became a leader of the Indian community in post-war British Malaya and a social activist with a particular concern for the Indian emigrant workers on the rubber estates. A founding member of the Malayan India Congress in 1946, she eventually became a senator in the Upper House of Parliament.

It is expected that Joyce Lebra's forthcoming publication, *Women Against the Raj: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment*, will shed more light not only on the high-profile Ranis but also those whose post-1945 lives followed more conventional trajectories.

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Notes

- http://www.s1942.org.sg/s1942/indian_national_army/breaking.htm
- <http://news.smashits.com/255928/Netajis-Jhansi-warrior-looks-back.htm>. 'Netaji' means 'Leader' but seems more affectionate than the German 'Führer'.

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