

ICH 2019**International Conference on Humanities****INDIAN WOMEN DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION IN
MALAYA, 1941-1945**

Syamala Nair (a)*, Mahani Musa (b)

*Corresponding author

(a) School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, syamnair.gopal@gmail.com

(b) School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia, mahani@usm.my

Abstract

Indians, regardless of class, endured hardship during the Japanese occupation, and the terrible encounter of Indians who lived in the estates were the most profound. Records of the Japanese occupation in Malaya and Singapore depicted women both as rivals of the Japanese and casualties of war. Studies on the Japanese treatment of Malayan women, particularly Indian women, however, have not merited much attention. This study examines how Indian women negotiated the Japanese occupation and their involvement in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. The study utilises qualitative method using archival sources, newspapers, and recollections from witnesses and participants of the Indian nationalist movement. Documentary sources kept at the National Archives of Malaysia and Singapore, and the Singapore Oral History Centre provide glimpses of how Indian women managed wartime challenges, and how the Japanese attempted to mobilise them. While a few fought against the Japanese, others had benefitted from Japanese overtures when wartime experiences impacted their post-war careers. The predicament experienced during Japanese occupation and involvement in the nationalist movement had encouraged Indian women to participate in self-help organisations and political parties to enhance their lives in post-independence Malaya.

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1. Introduction

Since the second half of the 19th century thousands of South Indians had migrated to Malaya. To attract them the British government highlighted the peninsula's considerable wealth and promised benefits like accommodation and route fees. The significant wage gap between South India and Malaya had attracted a large number of workers to the latter with the hope of getting better quality life for themselves and their families. Due to economic pressure faced by Indians, the colonial government used this opportunity to seek cheap labour and keep labourers in poor working conditions. As the Malayan economy expanded, the recruitment of Indian labourers became more essential. In the beginning, male labourers were preferred in the plantation, construction or mining sectors. Between 1844 and 1910, nearly 250,000 Indian labourers were brought into Malaya through a contract system (Dancz, 1987)

Traditionally, Indian women were not allowed to go out and earn money for a living, or even work in a foreign country. Both religion and culture had restricted their freedom and reminded them that as wives their main roles were to serve their husbands and their husbands' families (Dancz, 1987). Until 1920, the number of Indian male labourers who came to Malaya through the *kangani* system was more than their female counterparts. Even after 1920, Indian male labourers still accounted for almost 70 per cent of the workforce who came to Malaya. Most women who were brought in from South India comprised of Tamils, Telugus, and Malayali besides smaller number of Sikhs, Punjabi Hindus, Bengalis, and Gujarati who originated from North India. This means almost 80% of these women were Tamils (Sandhu, 1969).

In the 1890s, estate employers began to realise that they were too dependent on male labourers who worked on a temporary basis, which resulted in significant increase in production cost. With deteriorating political relations between the British government in India and in Malaya following their administrative separation in 1867, there was a decline of Indian migration to the latter. These necessitated estate employers to encourage Indian workers who came to Malaya to bring their wives and families. The aim was to ensure labour retention. Indian women who came in at that time were regarded as "labour reproducers" and "servicing agents" to the estate community. They were also considered as low-skilled workers. This was proven by the very low wages earned by Indian female labourers at that time. They were also ineligible for any bonuses or separate meals as they were regarded as secondary wage earners (Datta, 2016).

Nevertheless, the British government in Malaya and India had taken several steps to increase the recruitment of female labourers in Malaya to achieve a balanced ratio. Such measures involved the reduction of female recruitment fees, introduction of the Indian Immigration Act in 1922 and the Indian Immigration Regulations in 1923. These measures fixed the ratio of one woman to 1.5 men (Sandhu, 1969). Consequently, the number of Indian women enjoyed moderate increase in every Malay state and the Straits Settlements. In 1891 the ratio was 18 women per 1000 men but by 1931 the figure had improved to 482 women per 1000 men (Dancz, 1987).

2. Problem Statement

The study of Indian women in Malaya had attracted little attention and was often seen as of little significance among local historians. Studies conducted so far have largely focused on a holistic approach in discussing issues pertaining to the migration of Indians to Malaya at the beginning of the 18th and 19th

centuries as well as the abysmal living conditions in the estates (Amarjit Kaur, 2006; Sinnapah, 1970; Sandhu, 1969). It was much later that the fate of Indian workers, their plight, and struggles began to attract local historians. The role played by political organisations like the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) and labour unions such as the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) in voicing out the rights of Indian estate workers were only briefly mentioned without focusing, specifically on Indian women (Gomez, 1994; Ramasamy, 2000; Stenson, 1980). Based on historical perspective, this paper aimed to fill the gaps in the studies of Indian women by focusing on the Japanese occupation and its impact on Indian women during that time and post-independence Malaya.

3. Research Questions

The main research question focused on the challenges faced by Indian women during the Japanese occupation and what had motivated them to participate in the nationalist movement and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study aims to examine the struggles of Indian women during the Japanese occupation. It seeks to elaborate the involvement of Indian women in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, which was based in Malaya, and later in Singapore and Burma.

5. Research Methods

This study was done by means of qualitative analysis based on archival sources, wartime newspapers, and oral history interviews. This study had taken into account written documents and materials from the national archives in Malaysia and Singapore. Reports on labour and annual reports from the labour department was useful in examining the written documents of the Japanese occupation in Malaya. These records highlight government policy, special reports, manuscripts, and progress reports on social, economic, and political situation of Malaya during the Japanese occupation from 1941-1945. This study was also based on wartime newspapers like the Syonan Shimbun and Syonan Times, which were made available through NewspaperSG, and the New Straits Times portal.

Other newspaper articles were retrieved from the National Archives of Singapore while interview transcripts of those who were directly involved in the wartime regiment and Indian nationalist movement were obtained from the Oral History Centre in Singapore. These transcripts were reviewed to gather the relevant information. These sources provided much information on how Indian women from Malaya negotiate wartime challenges and strategies used by the Japanese used to mobilise them into supporting the war efforts. These sources also highlighted Japanese overtures that opened the eyes of Indian women, subaltern and elites alike, towards self-betterment. These sources also provided an opportunity to delve and analyse the motives behind the women's involvement in the nationalist movement, and how wartime experiences proved beneficial for them in their post-war careers.

6. Findings

6.1. Enduring the Japanese Occupation

Recognised as 'a short and awful time', the Japanese occupation had profoundly affected Malayan women. Their war encounters, as expounded in memoirs and various writings, revolved around several themes such as the hardships of war, assaults, torments by the Japanese, and even ruthless coercions to turn females into 'comfort women.' Assaults and the likelihood of assaults affected parents and youngsters, while the loss of property, starvation, torment, and the fear of being forcibly taken as sex slaves became a real worry for the women. Japanese visits to the house of Indian families during the evening to request for young women were frightening. Parents had to hide their girls in nearby jungles or swamps. Others sent their children to live with relatives in far-away towns as these towns were less frequented by Japanese soldiers (Musa, 2016). While some were fortunate to escape Japanese atrocities, others encountered assaults and torture. One such example was the experience of local nurse Sybil Kathigasu and her family in Papan, Perak. Kathigasu, known for helping injured communist guerrillas, related in her memoir how Malayan women, regardless of experience, had endured the war years:

“There was rape throughout Malaya in all places traversed by the military, both in the towns and in outlying villages and plantations. When younger women were not available, older women were not safe, but generally, it was the younger women and girls who were swept off or else raped before the eyes of their own families. Whenever there was the least resistance, all males were either bayoneted or slaughtered in cold blood, or else they were bound and made to watch the orgy of rape perpetrated on their own womenfolk.” (Kathigasu, 1983, p. 39)

In spite of the fact that women for the most part were threatened by sexual savagery during the occupation, they did not escape other types of brutality inflicted on them by the Kempeitai (Military Police). Kathigasu experienced physical and mental distress at the hands of the Ipoh Kempeitai. She and her doctor husband had set up a facility in a shop house in Papan, which gave humanitarian help to the injured guerrillas. This prompted her capture in August 1943, a month after the Japanese had detained her husband on suspicion of helping the guerrillas. Kathigasu was mercilessly tormented during interrogation to the point of incapacitation. Nonetheless, her fighting spirit, determination, and unwavering conviction of an Allied triumph, kept her alive. Her ordeal came to an end with the Japanese surrender after which she was taken to England for treatment. She passed away in June 1948. Kathigasu was granted the George Medal for valour by the British government (Musa, 2016).

Unfortunately, the story of Sybil Kathigasu and other women in Malaya, who faced similar encounters during the Japanese occupation, are kept out of the official account of the occupation. According to Patricia Lim Pui Huen, Sybil Kathigasu did not appear in the official accounts because she assisted the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), which was viewed as a communist party and, consequently, anti-nationalists by the post-war government. Therefore, her story was kept outside of the national history despite the fact her gallantry had earned a spot in the popular memoir (Huen, 2008).

The Japanese occupation period provided a sense of awareness among women in Malaysia. In general, women in this particular period were in dire straits. The horrifying war experience recorded in their memoirs and biographies showed the daily struggles they had to face (Musa, 2016). The Japanese occupation did not only overwhelm the Chinese community but also inflicted a scar on the lives of Indian

labourers in the estate. By the end of 1942, 18 Japanese rubber companies had merged to form the Syonan Rubber Syndicate, which took over the rubber industry in Malaya and Singapore. This syndicate allowed labourers to work for only 10 to 15 days a month. Moreover, the labourers were given low daily wages, which was about 30 to 40% less than the 1941 wages. In April 1943, the Japanese government undertook massive reduction in estate workforce, leaving many coolies jobless (Datta, 2015).

Besides the cruelty of the Japanese, Indian estate women had to face similar threats from their own race. The Japanese had appointed previous administrative staff (*kirani*) and handed them administrative positions that were once held by Europeans. This was done to resuscitate plantation production in Malaya. To please the Japanese, *kirani* forced workers to work from the first light to nightfall without sufficient rest or reasonable compensation (Ramasamy, 2000). The Japanese army also conscripted Indian male labourers to work in the construction of the death railway from Thanbyuzayat in Burma to Nongpladek in Thailand. This left many Indian female labourers unprotected in the estates. The Japanese army took the opportunity to harass and rape them (Datta, 2015). Jain, who did a study on Pal Melayu Estate during the Japanese occupation, provided a startling experience of a female coolie. There were reports of *kirani* and Japanese soldiers isolating newly married coolie couples by sending the men to the railroad project and keeping the wives as their mistresses. In one case, a *kirani* named Sivan requested all women in *Pal Melayu* Estate to consider him as their 'husband' since their real spouses were taken to the death railway (Jain, 1970). British intelligence report from 1943 caught the fear among Indian women and their hesitance to leave home but at the same time, they dreaded the thought of staying at home alone without their spouses or male relatives (Labour Inspector, 1943 & Datta, 2015).

6.1.1. Spirit of 'Nationalism' among Indian Women

Although Indians had to endure a series of problems during the Japanese occupation, they also benefitted from Japanese overtures through efforts to liberate the homeland from colonial rule. For some women hardships were part of their lives during the Japanese occupation. However, they made efforts to improve themselves when opportunities came knocking. They took on a greater number of jobs compared to pre-war years. Additionally, the Japanese viewed women as a propaganda tool and made them the subjects of projects to improve the Malayan work culture (Musa, 2016). The Japanese used slogans like "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" and "Asia for Asians" to evoke a strong sense of nationalism among Indians in Malaya to fight for Indian liberation.

Towards the end of 1943, the Japanese began to encourage more women to join the workforce. This started with the use of Japanese women as appropriate models for Malayan women to imbibe (Syonan Shimbun, 1944, August 24). In an article printed in the Syonan Times entitled "Through the eyes of women of Nippon", Japanese women were depicted as supporting the war by caring for the family, availing themselves to move forward, and courageously aiding the war efforts (Syonan Times, 1942, October 16). Malayan women were admonished to be well-refined spouses. In similar vein, they were urged to be versatile, adaptable to the environment, and to get things done during harsh occasions (Syonan Times, 1942, October 20). A similar article proposed women to reinvigorate their lives to help realise the goals of Greater East Asia. 'Emulate Japanese Women' became a renowned catchphrase in Malayan social gatherings. It

featured the wartime changes of Japanese women to expect heavier responsibilities (Syonan Shimbun, 1944, January 25).

Accordingly, the Indian Independent League (IIL) was established. IIL was a political organisation set up by Indian nationalists from Southeast Asia in 1928. Its main purpose was to oppose British rule in India. IIL was led by Ras Behari Bose. After IIL had gained attention, a military movement called the Indian National Army (INA) was established. It was led by Colonel Mohan Singh. By February 1942, IIL branches were located in Kedah, Perak, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Penang, and Singapore with membership estimated total at 84,700. By September 1942, memberships had ballooned to 120,000 while INA recruits stood at 16,000 by the end of 1942 (Dancz, 1987 & Datta, 2016).

Due to leadership issues and relatively weak goals, IIL and INA were getting less attention from the Indian community after 1942. After the appointment of the charismatic nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose as IIL leader, support from Indians increased tremendously. Subhas Chandra Bose was a radical nationalist and Congress party leader in India at one time. In July 1943, he became the President of IIL and Commander-In-Chief of INA. In October 1943, he set up an Indian provisional government known as Azad Hind, and this government had declared war on Britain and the United States. It received recognition from Japan, Germany, and Italy (Hills & Silverman, 1993).

As the movement was not based on caste, social class, gender, and political ideology, the IIL organisation received encouraging support from both male and female Indians in Malaya. Subhas Chandra Bose introduced 12 departments under the IIL and 12 ministries in his provisional government with one ministry dedicated to women. It was led by Lt. Col. Lakshmi Swaminathan, a 30-year-old female doctor from Singapore (Lebra Chapman, 2008, p. 75).

The establishment of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, a women's military force under the INA, became a reality when Indian women supported Subash Chandra Bose's move. Indian women considered its establishment as a form of respect for women. Bose believed the role of women was crucial in realising India's liberation from colonial rule. This was noted in 1943 during the inauguration of this regiment in Singapore:

'if women are given a chance to play their part, they will prove the equal of their brothers in fighting for their country' (Syonan Shimbun, 1943, October 23).

The call was well received by Indian women in Malaya and Singapore. It was estimated more than 2,000 Indian women had declared to join the unit after hearing this speech. One former female soldier of the Rani Jhansi, Janaki Nahappan estimated 1,000 women had joined. They comprised mostly of educated women. However, there were Indian female labourers who had joined the unit and fought alongside doctors, teachers, and nurses. The participation of these women showed an awareness of emancipation and the spirit of nationalism among Indian women in Malaya. This was proven through voluntary participation of elite and non-elite women to liberate India from British rule (Padzil, 2016).

However, uncertainty lingered in many historians' minds as to what was the real cause that led to Bose's decision to form the regiment. Some claimed it was a set up to get support from the men while for others, it was mere propaganda. Although Bose was said to be in favour of gender equality in engaging women to achieve Indian independence, his actions were often linked to a political agenda. One view

claimed that women's emancipation was never Bose's primary goal as his real aim was Indian independence. This is seen from the perspective of K.R Menon who was a former IIL senior officer:

'The Rani of Jhansi Regiment was a mere puppet show. And not a single women knew how to wield a knife properly. They knew how to wield the kitchen knife, but not the knife for the battle. And they had no other source because every day this propaganda going on and asking Indian women to come and join. They are not going to fight, you know, but they are going to do other services for the army – the regular army...' (K.R. Menon, 1982)

Another view pointed out that Bose's oratory skills had attracted many women towards him, and some of them were ever willing to donate jewellery: "if the women were wearing jewellery, she took off all their jewellery and gave it to him" (Singh, 1984).

However, this view was disputed by women themselves including elites who held high positions in the regiment. One of them Dato' Rasammah Bhupalan posited the establishment of this regiment was to show that women would also play an important role in the liberation of the homeland, striving hand in hand with the men. She also pointed out when Indian men who had previously joined the British army saw their womenfolk willing to leave their families and march into battle for the country's future, the men would feel guilty (Gopinath, 2007). Datta (2015) quoted her opinion on the reason behind the involvement of Indian women from the estates in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment,

'Many of them hadn't even heard of India's national independence movement. They were uneducated, they were totally exploited. They were in misery. They were not aware of certain things that were taking place, but they were aware of Gandhi.... Because of the extreme deprivation they had, it was easy for them to understand that they were in a slave situation and enslaved from dawn to dusk. And even in their families. When Netaji spoke of being 'free' they were moved. Because of the extreme exploitation and deprivation they faced, they were able to understand what freedom from such an enslaved situation would be. Even in their families, their husbands tended to be the 'lord' of their lives ... but there came a movement that proved that they were humans and had rights. Netaji gave them the status for which they could give their lives For estate women it was a bonanza, it was a new world, a rainbow....' (p. 101).

According to Dr Sahgal, the Indian community in Southeast Asia at that time consisted of people living with numerous disadvantages and did not hold high positions. They were mainly labourers in rubber estates, workers in the Public Works Department, clerks, and office assistants. Based on their confidence in Bose's intentions, nearly 1000 women joined this regiment to attain Indian independence. Supporting Rasammah Bhupalan's view, Dr Sahgal admitted that coolie women were truly treated like animals. These subaltern women were mishandled and used by the men in the estates to fulfil different needs. Joining the regiment made these women feel 'human' with added value instead of being sexual objects or workers. Dr Sahgal pointed out the part where Bose asserted in his speech on the importance of women's participation in the homeland freedom movement. The freedom that they wanted to achieve was not merely the freedom of the land, but also freedom for themselves, "...now this is their chance not only to get the freedom of the country but to get their own emancipation" (Sahgal, 1990). Dr Tan Ban Cheng, a former student of St. Joseph Institution also supports Dr Sahgal's view. He used to watch the women during training since the regiment started using the playground opposite his school for training purposes. He reminiscence,

‘Well, they seemed to be very proud of themselves. And they used to walk with a sort of swagger because we were all living under very sort of poor condition. And then they were well provided away with nice uniforms and they were well-fed. So, they seemed to be enjoying their privilege as soldiers in those days’ (Cheng, 1984)

However, archival materials and oral history sources only focused on one group namely the elite women while the voices of subaltern women such as Indian female labourers in the estate, which made up almost 80% of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, were not given enough attention and appreciation. Was the real purpose of their participation to oppose British rule? As noted earlier, these subaltern Indian women consisted of uneducated women who were not exposed to the outside world. Hence, nationalist ideas trumpeted by Bose were not easily understood by them. The real purpose of them joining the regiment was to escape from the hardships in the estate. They also joined to protect themselves from several problems such as food and cloth scarcity, sexual harassment, and domestic violence.

The establishment of the regiment was also to meet the needs for nurses and cooks who provided food for the independence fighters. Although initially the regiment was given military training, they did not participate in any activity on the battlefield, whereas, young Indian women were assured that they will be sent to Japan for military training,

‘Indian girls and women, who volunteered to join the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, have started their training, two hours daily. The training now is given by instructors but later special instructors from the Azad Hind Training School will take charge. It is understood that when the camp for training women volunteers is opened all volunteers will proceed there for more specialised military and first aid training’ (Syonan Shimbun, 1943, September 14).

According to Andaya and Leonard (2017), although this regiment was established as support group for cooking, medical treatment, and other works, the regiment also received military training and was involved in the Burmese war front. Andaya and Leonard (2017) agreed that Indian women joined this regiment to escape poverty and caste or class discrimination:

The uneducated young Tamil women who left the plantations to join the INA knew little about nationalism in India, and within the regiment, they still experienced the discrimination of caste and class. Nevertheless, they embraced the opportunity to escape lives of poverty and drudgery, and their example was often invoked by Bose to inspire male recruits’ (Andaya & Leonard, 2017).

According to Arunima Datta (2016), Indian women used ‘situational choice’ whereby they used any available opportunity to further their own interest. Indian coolie women were never naïve despite being depicted in that manner in most of the academic work regarding coolie lives in Malaya. She demonstrated that coolie women, who lived in deplorable conditions in the estates, utilised ‘situational agency’ to escape victimhood and joined the Rani of Jhansi Regiment for the same reasons. Their objective was not to challenge or change societal order but rather to get away from a disturbing marriage or the hardships of life at home. They returned to Malaya from Burma after the INA failure at Imphal in 1944 thus sealing the fate of the regiment. As a result, these subaltern women, who hailed from the estates fared ineffectively in comparison to the women from the elite class of the same regiment. Bhupalan and others from the elite class utilised their involvement in the battalion to become significant players of the post-war political and social associations.

Based on the involvement of Indian women in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, one can deduce that these women did not join the regiment to merely escape from their spouses, but possibly also to get away from the hardships of life at home. The regiment offered regular meals and nourishment, a fixed pay, and provided an asylum from the *kirani*, *kangani* and Japanese soldiers. Both men and women in the INA and in the regiment were paid the same amount of wages, something which had never happened in the estates before. Besides women were intrigued by the opportunity of military training, a common tradition for men, which was granted to women as well. In other words, these women had many reasons to join the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

7. Conclusion

Indians in Malaya enjoyed ample advantages after joining the INA and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. The efforts and initiatives taken by the INA and the regiment had raised the status of Indians from merely exploited labourers to freedom fighters with dignity and respect. It also gave organisational and leadership experience to selected number of Indian men and women. In summary, INA transformed the lives of thousands of Indian men and women from the working class and low-level administration in Malaya. INA had encouraged Indians to not only fight for the freedom of India but also to settle the score with the previous colonial power—a power, which was responsible for keeping Indian immigrants in an inferior position. In general, the regiment claimed that Indian women gained recognition upon their involvement in the regiment. It gave an opportunity to Indian women to re-evaluate their existence in society. Indian women who returned from the Imphal debacle became braver, more critical, were highly respected and had an ardent passion for freedom. The Indian women were inspired by the exposure and the influence of the nationalist movement from other countries such as India, and the involvement of Malay and Chinese women in social activism, labour struggles, and political consciousness. Injustice, labour exploitation, and the experiences during the Japanese occupation had opened their eyes and minds to rally together with women of other races in voicing their rights and interests.

The personal experience and awareness of nationalism among women had led them to make decisions in politics as the case with Indian female figures namely Janaki Athi Nahappan and Devaki Krishnan. The experiences women had gained during the Japanese occupation and their involvement in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment had also awakened Indian females like Bhupalan to participate actively in self-help organisations, and further enhanced the status of Indian women in Malaya. Finally, the Malayan Indian women's socio-economic status and political consciousness received more attention and was actively concentrated on post-independence.

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