BOOK REVIEWS

Women Against the Raj: The Rani of Jhansi Regiment
Joyce Chapman Lebra

Review by Joseph M. Fernando, University of Malaya

This book provides a captivating insight into a little known women's army, a wing of the Indian National Army, in Malaya that was involved in operations to liberate India from British rule during the Second World War. This women's regiment has gained something of a cult image among history enthusiasts. This is partly because very little details are known about the exploits of these young rebels and the traditionally conservative role of women perceived in Indian society in that era.

Joyce Lebra's book thus provides a refreshing window into the almost-forgotten experiences of this women's regiment that previously remained scarcely researched. It sheds some light as to what motivated these young women to become involved in a difficult war and the circumstances in which they were drawn or inspired to join this Japanese-sponsored armed outfit. The fact that the theme is undertaken by this renowned academic of Indian nationalism has given this medium-sized book a higher academic profile and standing.

Recruited largely from among the teenage women from the rubber estates in Malaya but led by well-educated middle and upper class Indian women from Malaya (and Burma), the Rani of Jhansi Regiment came into being in July 1943 headed by a medical doctor, Dr Lakshmi Swaminadhan. The wing came into being despite Japanese opposition to a women's wing in the INA. Lakshmi was instrumental in recruiting young women from over Malaya to join the freedom movement. She travelled around the country during this wartime period to give talks on the 'freedom movement' and to recruit women.

These young women were inspired by Indian nationalist Subash Chandra Bose's campaign to liberate India from British rule. His speeches in Malaya on the need to free India from colonial rule were closely followed and inspired many among the Indian community. Many of these women indicated in the interviews conducted by the author that they were inspired to join the regiment after having read or heard Bose's speeches. Lebra observes that this calling was an opportunity for these women to gain self-respect and to assert their sense of identity in a difficult and even oppressive environment. The rubber estates were, she notes, the economic, cultural and social environment that produced most of the volunteers in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment.

Almost half the 132-page book is devoted to the discussion of the origins and evolution of Indian nationalism and the involvement of Indian nationalist Subash Chandra Bose in the Malaya-based Indian National Army (INA). Then the author turns to the Rani of Jhansi Regiment and develops an engaging narrative about the exploits of these Indian women in Malaya, some of whom saw action in Burma. Drawing on numerous interviews of survivors of the Regiment's campaign in Burma, where some of them were deployed from March 1944 to August 1945, the author provides a revealing insight into nature of the struggle shouldered by these women and their sense of purpose. The narrative