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**“Drive out the British Devil”: Lived
Experience, Political Participation, and
Long-Distance Nationalism in the Indian
Diaspora in Singapore and Bangkok, 1940-44**

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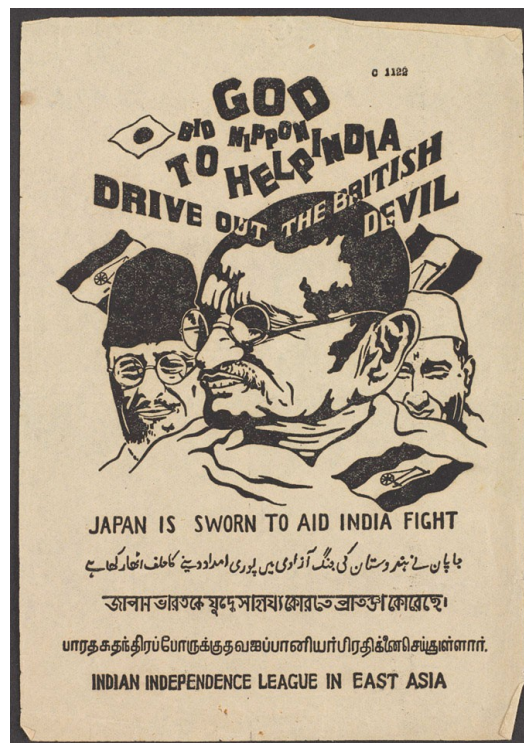
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“Drive out the British Devil”: Lived Experience, Political Participation, and Long-Distance Nationalism in the Indian Diaspora in Singapore and Bangkok, 1940-44



Indian Independence League Pamphlet, c.1943. <<https://collection.nam.ac.uk/detail.php?acc=2000-06-161-1>> [accessed: 20 March 2026]

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Abbreviations

INA - Indian National Army

IIL - Indian Independence League

IYL - Indian Youth League

CIAM - Central Indian Association of Malaya

RJR - Rani Jhansi Regiment

RKM - Ramakrishna Mission

Introduction

On January 29, 1946, the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre set up by the British government in India received several documents written by Captain K.P. Dhargalkar, a King's Commissioned Indian Officer of the 3rd cavalry. Dhargalkar was one of the Indian witnesses to testify against the Indian National Army during the infamous Red Fort trials. After the fall of Singapore to Japan in early-1942, he was transported to Bangkok and then back to Singapore as a prisoner of war. Crucially, at both places, he encountered local independence propaganda run by resident Indian civilians who had been 'watchmen and fruit vendors before the war'.¹

Dhargalkar's account reinforced the characterisation of the INA in wartime allied intelligence. Its reliance on the Indian POWs, alongside the ties of both Rashbehari Bose and the nationalist leader Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose with Japan, meant that the movement was understood as 'entirely a creation of the Japanese'.² This extended into characterisation of diasporic civilians as well. Post-war interrogations of Indian civilians as Japanese 'collaborators' entrenched this identity.³ As a consequence, the diaspora has remained a contested space both within historical memory and much of the existing scholarship - either confined to the INA's identity as fascist 'collaborators' or canonised in post-colonial readings as a supporting cast in Netaji's politics.

This dissertation challenges these passive, almost binary characterisations of the diaspora. The emphasis on military loyalty and leadership has rarely centred how Indian civilians experienced the movement in their everyday lives or expressed their political identities and consciousnesses. Effectively, privileging the great men approach to political thought has reduced the caste, class, and gender experiences and expressions of civilians into a homogeneous narrative and flattened a socially and politically fragmented diasporic space.⁴ Arunima Datta and Shompa Lahiri have recently sought to address this by recovering the gendered and socio-economically contingent experiences of women of the Rani Jhansi Regiment.⁵ However, this remains to be extended to the interrogation of the ways in which civilian articulations emerged across different diasporic contexts or the recovery of the expressions of peripheral actors like estate women and children.

¹ Subhas Chandra Bose Papers, India Office Private Papers, Mss Eur Photo Eur 397, 1943-48.

² 'The Rise and Fall of the Indian National Army', *Office of Strategic Services R&A* 31425, 8 June, 1945.

³ 'Activities of the INA and the IIL', FCO 141/14392, D2014040111.

⁴ Pippa Virdee, 'Remembering Partition: Women, Oral Histories and the Partition of 1947', *Oral History*, 41.2 (2013), pp.49-62.

⁵ Arunima Datta, *Fleeting Agencies* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).; Shompa Lahiri, 'Performing anti-colonial military identities in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, 1943-1945: War, diasporic women and decolonisation', *Gender & History*, 36 (2024), pp.602-619, doi.org:10.1111/1468-0424.12677.

This dissertation reconfigures the diaspora as an active, analytical site of inquiry and contends that civilian participation in the movement was fragmented, conscious, and locally contingent. Firstly, examining the case studies of two radically different diasporic locales in Singapore and Bangkok between 1940 and 1942, the dissertation argues that socio-political identities of the spaces as well as migrant perceptions associated with them significantly influenced personal and political expressions of nationhood amongst civilians and determined how pan-Indianism was institutionally developed and embraced. Hence, while Singapore's colonial, multi-ethnic status meant that pan-Indianism as an identity and relational space was consolidated before the Japanese invasion through processes of labour unionism and negotiations vis-à-vis the British, Bangkok's independence and transient character in Indian migrant imaginaries facilitated the (re)emergence of subversive anti-colonialism, both in its revolutionary and Gandhian forms.

Secondly, by foregrounding peripheral actors like subaltern women and children between 1943 and 1944, it contends that civilian participation cannot be collapsed into a uniform patriotic - least of all militaristic impulse, that existing works have ascribed to Bose's charisma and vision. While it does not seek to diminish Netaji's centrality, it argues that civilian participation was most immediately shaped by their personal and situational agency and conditioned by identities like class, caste, and age. Recovering their peripheral forms of consciousness from quotidian practices like women's jewellery donation and children's marches and performances - as this thesis shows, repositions civilian participation as agentic, rational expressions through which even the most peripheral actors consciously negotiated the terms of their political participation.

Historiography

Histories of Indian nationalism in Southeast Asia remain disproportionately focussed on Netaji and military histories of the INA. Seminal works by Sugata Bose and Peter Fay have relegated diasporic civilians as a passive, 'large social base of support'.⁶ As Robert Kearney has shown, this approach reflects Netaji's 'posthumous reception' in India and how post-colonial literature has tried to integrate this movement into the cultural register of Indian nationalism, distancing it from its civilian imaginaries and engagements.⁷ This problem is not unique to this context - as Harjot Oberoi has shown, 'role of the diaspora remains under-theorised in histories of Indian

⁶ Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent* (Harvard University Press, 2011), p.239.; Peter Ward Fay, *The Forgotten Army* (University of Michigan Press, 1995).

⁷ Robert Kearney, 'The Mentor in the Commencement of a Political Career: the Case of Subhas Chandra Bose and CR Das', *Journal of Political & Military Sociology*, 12.1 (1984), pp.37-47.

nationalism’.⁸ Zaib-un-Nisa Aziz has reinforced this, urging scholars to examine ‘nationalism outside a specific national territory’.⁹ This dissertation builds on these interventions by centring the diasporic space and recovering the voices and agency of Indian civilians. In this context, it is pertinent to define the ‘diaspora’. This thesis adopts Safran’s definition of a diaspora as a population defined by its spatial dispersal and ethnonational consciousness retaining persistent ties to the homeland.¹⁰ This, however, does not imply a singular identity across these spaces - as this thesis contends throughout, diasporic identity and the creation of alternate public spheres is best understood as a locally contingent ‘accommodation with, or resistance to, host spaces’.¹¹

Existing histories of wartime Southeast Asia are focussed largely on structural transformations. While Paul Kratoska and Gregg Huff have studied how the collapse of British rule ‘accelerated independence and Southeast Asian nationalism’ in ethnic minority communities, their accounts remain limited to elitist political discourse and inattentive to the contested dynamics of civilian political consciousness.¹² Within the Indian context, Rajesh Rai’s account on the Singaporean Indian diaspora chronologically documents the institutionalisation of Indian representation.¹³ His sole focus on Singapore, however, means the work does not fully address the heterogeneity of Southeast Asia’s socio-political landscape, which determined the divergent emergences and articulations of pan-Indian nationalism as well as the experiences of different social groups.

Existing scholarship on Bangkok, in particular, is limited. Scholars like Bruce Reynolds offer insights into specific institutions engaged in Indian nationalism in wartime Bangkok; however, no existing work has comprehensively studied the relation between Indian migrant imaginaries and the parallel and co-existing ways in which anti-colonial expressions emerged in the city.¹⁴ Putting Singapore and Bangkok in a comparative perspective, the thesis reframes nationalism as a locally contingent civilian-led process, challenging both the focus on Japanese and external actors and the homogeneity with which the Southeast Asian space is treated in the literature.

⁸ Harjot Oberoi, ‘Ghadar Movement and Its Anarchist Genealogy’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44.50 (2009), pp.40–46.

⁹ Zaib-un-Nisa Aziz, ‘Passages from India: Indian Anti-Colonial Activism in Exile, 1905–20’, *Historical Research*, 90.248 (2017), pp.404–421, doi.org:10.1111/1468-2281.12175.

¹⁰ William Safran, ‘Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return’, *Diaspora*, 1.1 (1991), pp.83–99.

¹¹ James Clifford, ‘Diasporas’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3 (1994), pp.302–38.

¹² Paul H. Kratoska (ed.), *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire* (Routledge, 2012).; Gregg Huff, *World War II and Southeast Asia* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp.403–4.

¹³ Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore: 1819–1945* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁴ E. Bruce Reynolds, ‘The Indian Community and the Indian Independence Movement in Thailand during World War II’ in *Southeast Asian Minorities in the Wartime Japanese Empire*, ed. by Paul H. Kratoska (Routledge, 2012), pp.170–192.

Furthermore, this thesis positions itself within the small but emerging revisionist trend that has reinterpreted long-distance Indian nationalism using social and subaltern lenses. Some notable scholars include Arunima Datta, Vera Hildebrand, and Shompa Lahiri - who have worked at the nexus of gender and labour histories and leveraged oral interviews to recover how class and caste identities shaped the movement's protean social memory.¹⁵ However, these are focussed on one single regiment - the RJR, and rarely consider other peripheral actors like children and women outside the RJR. Datta's *Fleeting Agencies* is an exception, as it has sought to reposition *coolie* women as agentic actors by rescuing them from binaries of nationalist and allied records.

This work builds on Datta's efforts to utilise oral histories alongside formal records to recover archival marginalities. It adds to this methodological framework by making a fresh contribution that places these accounts in dialogic relation with material culture, like the donated jewellery. By reflecting on the importance of jewellery in the everyday life of South Asian women - their 'most important personal property', it demonstrates that a close attention to this act of donation recovers women's divergent socio-economic identities and what different women sought to do by donating jewellery.¹⁶ This thesis further extends this recovery of political consciousness and agency to children, who are wholly absent in the existing literature. It draws on the comparative context of the politicisation of children in wartime Europe and suggests that studying quotidian practices like their school activities and public performances in dialogue with retrospective recollections enables their recovery as both agentic and affective actors.¹⁷ Incorporating these peripheral actors enables this thesis to broaden the analytical scope of Indian nationalism in Southeast Asia as well as rectify the passivity of civilian actors in the dominant scholarship.

Methodology

Given the marginalisation of civilians in allied and Japanese sources, their homogenisation in nationalist rhetoric, and their reduction to a supporting cast in dominant histories, this thesis employs a methodology that is considerate of both lived complexities and archival silences.

A heterogeneous source base is used for this purpose. Written and visual materials, like wartime intelligence, photographed letters, newspapers, written memoirs, and photographs of jewellery

¹⁵ Vera Hildebrand, *Women at War* (HarperCollins India, 2016).

¹⁶ Nilika Mehrotra, 'Gold and Gender in India: Some Observations from South Orissa', *Indian Anthropologist*, 34.1 (2004), pp.27-39.

¹⁷ Johanna Sköld and Ingrid Söderlind, 'Agentic Subjects and Objects of Political Propaganda: Swedish Media Representations of Children in the Mobilization For Supporting Finland During World War II', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, 11.1 (2018), pp.27-46, doi.org:10.1353/hcy.2018.0002.

and boy scouts, are analysed alongside oral history interviews from the Singapore Archives and the fieldworks of other historians. This is crucial to mediate the archival marginality of key segments of the diaspora - like estate women and children, whose voices are unacknowledged because of their class identities and positionality, as Datta contends.¹⁸ Although including oral history does not make this study immune to problems of representational politics (*who speaks for whom?*) that Spivak has raised and issues of memory and forgetfulness, it ‘grasps traces of the environment of memory’ in a way that recognises the caste, class, and gendered realities.¹⁹

Archival research has been carried out both in-person and online. Newspapers used in the study include Singaporean and Thai publications and the *Azad Hind* - the official mouthpiece of IIL, retrieved through a recent digitisation by the Wikimedia Foundation. The National Library of Singapore’s OCR-enabled resource has made keyword searches possible, though this thesis is admittedly limited to its English database. Newspapers are key sources because of their daily centrality to the public sphere as well as for enabling propaganda.²⁰ This propagandic element is especially present in the wartime context of this study, as both British and Japanese regimes carried out active censorships and surveillance. To mitigate this, this thesis explicitly focusses on news items that give an impression of directly quoting or representing civilian testimonies.

However, it is worth noting that even then, voices of the most peripheral remain mediated via specific rhetorical narratives. This is also true for Indian nationalist sources like the *Azad Hind* and even extends to formal sites of working-class organisation like trade unionism - a problem accentuated by the ‘presence of a middle-class leadership cadre’, that subaltern theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty alludes to.²¹ While recognising these limits, this dissertation uses newspapers for their proximity to the actual historical civilian public spheres than military-centric archives and supplements their use by leveraging a counter-archive of oral history records and photographs of material culture and activities to enable the fragmented recovery of civilian expressions.

The official category of documents - like IIL records, Netaji Papers, and wartime intelligence, are hosted in the physical archives, with some digitised access. These include the India Office Records and FCO collections in the British Library and the UK National Archives and recently

¹⁸ Datta, pp.149-150.

¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Macmillan Education, 1988), pp.271-313.; Indira Chowdhury, ‘Speaking of the Past: Perspectives on Oral History’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 49.30 (2014), pp. 39-42.

²⁰ Sköld and Söderlind, pp.6-8.

²¹ Talat Ahmed, ‘Theories of Difference: the Subaltern Project Examined’, *International Socialism*, 10 Oct. 2014, <https://isi.org.uk/theories-of-difference-the-subaltern-project-examined/> [accessed 1 Apr. 2026].

de-classified Netaji Papers between 2015 and 2016 digitised by the National Archives of India, which no scholar has used to recover civilian activities so far. This thesis engages with the files to recover surviving women's jewellery, including photos from National Archives, and batch photos of Balak Sena, which are important supplementary sources for oral histories, especially in recovering the agentic and affective dimensions of the participation of peripheral actors. The methodological intervention of reading jewellery donation as a context-specific expression of political consciousness is in line with a recent emphasis laid on the identity-contingent ways in which material objects are used, advanced at the 2021 Sciences Po History conference.²²

Activities of the diaspora have also been recovered from de-classified CIA records, and some first-hand memoirs by IIL veterans like the journalist M. Sivaram and Kesar Singh Giani, both published after the war. While these memoirs generally have a degree of emotiveness attached to the way they have been written, they offer valuable testimony and recollections and record conference proceedings and civilian correspondence that are indispensable for this thesis.

Direct personal interviews with participants, while desirable, are not possible considering the limited number of veterans alive today and their geographical expanse. Even within the existing oral accounts, the thesis is attentive to memory and forgetfulness significantly. This is crucial in light of when these took place – largely in the 1980s by National Archives of Singapore and between 2008-20 as part of the fieldworks conducted by other scholars. As such, an attempt is made to contextualise sources - both oral records and other primary sources, with the author's identity, production context, and their intended audience. This is useful to consider both who is represented and excluded from these accounts, as well as to crucially examine how the plural modalities of participation reflected the plural civilian identities, situations, and expressions.

Structure

This dissertation is structured into three chapters. Chapter 1 examines the consolidation of pan-Indianism in Singapore between 1940 and 1942, foregrounding the role of trade unionism and everyday engagements with the colonial authority in politicising a consolidated local, civilian-led diasporic public sphere. Chapter 2 analyses anti-colonialism in Bangkok within this period, arguing that Indian migrant imaginaries and its socio-political context enabled co-existing but more radical, subversive anti-colonialism. Chapter 3 turns to the period between 1943 and 1944

²² 'Material Culture is especially relevant for the analysis of gendered identities', *Sciences Po*, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/gender-studies/en/news/material-culture-especially-relevant-analysis-gendered-identities/> [accessed 18 Mar. 2026].

and rethinks political participation amongst civilians as a negotiated and conscious process by recovering the situational voices of peripheral actors like subaltern women and children.

Pan-Indian Nationalism in Singapore, 1940-42

In May 1941, merely nine months before Japan occupied Singapore, the ethno-linguistic fault-lines in the Indian community resurfaced. The proposed All-Tamil Malaya Association evoked strong protests from existing Indian organisations that warned against flaming ‘communal ill-feeling and jealousy’.²³ Yet, by 1943, Singapore became the nerve-centre of Indian nationalist upheaval in Southeast Asia and ‘civilians provided unprecedented support’ for the movement.²⁴

How did this fractured diaspora undergo such transformation? This chapter revisits this tension from below. Contrary to the dominant emphasis on the disruption of colonial rule in the wartime as the starting point for the consolidation of Indian public spheres in Southeast Asia, it argues that pan-Indianism in Singapore emerged locally through processes of labour unionism, civic representation, and community sites as a socially embedded and politically functional basis for Indian diasporic identity.²⁵ Following the Occupation, the Japanese encountered a structurally consolidated Indian identity, and the broad social base and leadership of this representation strategically re-articulated its legitimacy and negotiated imperatives of the new political order.

As a port-city, Singapore was central to British presence in Southeast Asia. Indian migration to Malaya - which Singapore was a part of, radically altered under colonial rule, as labourers came to supplant the pre-colonial dominance of traders.²⁶ Singapore had over 51,800 Indians in 1931, around 9% of its population and 8.2% of Indians in Malaya.²⁷ This also comprised a small but noteworthy Peranakan (locally-born) Indians, meaning Indians had started settling in the region by the 1930s.²⁸ A large proportion of Indians were engaged as labourers and watchmen. Some also dealt in business; yet the city’s cosmopolitanism was largely ‘an Anglo-Chinese preserve’, given their economic standing.²⁹ Moreover, what being an Indian meant was contested. Inter-war years saw solidifying ethnic and caste ties; while an Indian Association was started to unite Indians in 1923, its Anglophone character lacked any ‘connection with everyday Indian life’.³⁰

²³ ‘Tamils’ Association: A Protest’, *Malaya Tribune*, 9 May 1941.

²⁴ Bose, p.239.

²⁵ KK Ghosh, *The Indian National Army* (Meenakshi Prakashan, 1969), p. 44.

²⁶ Kernail Singh Sandhu, ‘Some Aspects of Indian Settlement in Singapore, 1819-1969’, *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 10.2 (1969), pp.193–201.

²⁷ Jayati Bhattacharya, ‘Stories from the Margins: Indian Business Communities in the Growth of Colonial Singapore’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 50 (2019), pp.521–39.

²⁸ Samuel Dhoraingam, *Peranakan Indians of Singapore and Melaka* (ISEAS Publications, 2006), p.xi.

²⁹ Bhattacharya, p.532.

³⁰ Rai, p.179; ‘Storm over Mr. Sastri’s Singapore Visit’, *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 12 Jan. 1937.

The first attempt to define Indian-ness using ethno-linguistic terms in the *Malaya Tribune* was a drastic failure. Indian exchanges with Chinese counterparts between 1929 and 1930 revealed anxieties around the lack of a shared linguistic identity, limiting claims to any ethno-linguistic Indian-ness. While some believed Hindi would be a ‘common language, just like Mandarin’, others stressed Tamil, given its numerical strength in the diaspora.³¹ Indeed, Tamils, constituted 61% of Indians, yet remained unrepresented in most Indian societies because of their working-class connotations.³² Ultimately, then, this debate underscored internal community fractures.

This became a community-wide issue by 1940. Partly, it was because of the critical opposition to pan-Indianism by Tamil politics, sections of which promoted social reform, caste rejection, and education outside an Indian identity. As Rai has shown, this constrained the agency of pan-Indianism.³³ In 1938, for instance, when Indians sought a company as the sole community unrepresented in the volunteer corps, the British turned down the plea, arguing there was no real ‘representative’ Indian opinion to consult.³⁴ This was such a setback that Indians began publicly debating ways to resolve it. One D.S. Spero advocated for merging all existing organisations.³⁵ Others felt that the Indian Association needed to be reformed.³⁶ By making civic representation contested, this ‘disunity’ forced pan-Indian advocates to confront their narrow, elitist scope.

By 1940, therefore, the need for a consolidated Indian representation was emerging in response to local difficulties with the fractured Indian-ness. This included both a newfound emphasis on organising the overlooked labourers - many of whom were Tamils, which found mention in the Indian Association’s 1940 review, as well as public engagement and education.³⁷ This marked a fundamental shift from past approaches since the pan-Indian public sphere was now sought to be co-created as an inclusive, socially legitimised basis of representation. Crucially, this was done in two ways - firstly, by coordinating the activities of existing associations like the Indian Association, Indian Youth League, and Central Indian Association of Malaya that tried to reach as far as Malayan rubber estates and second, to transcend ethno-linguistic identities by adopting vernacular articulations of labour unionism and via multilingual community-wide spaces like

³¹ Chua Ai Lin, ‘Nation, Race, and Language: Discussing Transnational Identities in Colonial Singapore, circa 1930’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 46 (2012), pp.283–302, doi.org:10.1017/S0026749X11000801.

³² John Solomon, ‘The Decline of Pan-Indian Identity and the Development of Tamil Cultural Separatism in Singapore, 1856–1965’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 35.2 (2012), pp.257–281.

³³ Rai, pp.188–193.

³⁴ ‘Government Urged to Seek Indian Opinion’, *The Straits Budget*, 22 Feb. 1940.

³⁵ D.S. Spero, ‘Mixed Indian Club’, *The Straits Times*, 7 Aug. 1939.

³⁶ ‘Indian Views Wanted’, *The Straits Times*, 18 July 1939.

³⁷ ‘Indians’ Year of Achievement’, *Malaya Tribune*, 21 Sept. 1940.

the Ramakrishna Mission. This provided pan-Indianism both its middle-class outreach from the city as well as working-class articulations legitimising its cross-caste, cross-linguistic basis.

Turning to labour unionism, KM Rengarajoo, a member of Singapore's Indian Youth League, reflected on the transformative turn that the IYL's engagement with labour strikes had on its popularity. After the strikes, 'the common people were attracted to IYL and it became popular', Rengarajoo claimed.³⁸ The strikes - that also feature in other reflections like Mohinder Singh's, were the Klang Estate strikes in 1941, where IYL was financially involved.³⁹ This was possible because of the increasing convergence between Shrish Chandra Goho - the IYL President, and Nedyam Raghavan, the CIAM leader. In his detailed examination, HE Wilson has shown how the middle-class pan-Indian outreach was responsible for the formation of the Klang District Indian Union, the first 'national' trade union at a time when the British prohibited unionism.⁴⁰ RH Nathan, a clerk who led this labour union, also edited *Tamil Nesan* - a key paper in Tamil that promoted Indian nationalism and political developments in the vernacular and was viewed by officials as an 'ardent Congressite'.⁴¹ Both parties informed each other - while union leaders imparted 'national identity and pride' to bring workers in the fold of pan-Indianism, labourers also consciously engaged because it gave them both a basis to organise to demand 'improved wages and conditions of service' and the hope that they 'would be treated as human beings'.⁴²

Acknowledging the nationalist character of unionism, the colonial police stated:

CIAM's involvement will foster Indian political activities and pro-Congress sympathies ...everything should be done to discourage among labourers interest in Indian politics.⁴³

Although the strikes were brutally suppressed, the broad base of the politics - with over 20,000 labourers, provided pan-Indianism a newfound social credibility. It made Goho, Raghavan, and KPK Menon the champions of Indians in Singapore, replacing the previous leadership of these organisations dominated by merchants. By 1942, IYL - which continued its labour unionism, grew to around 10,000 members and included nationalist speeches.⁴⁴ Although it did not always

³⁸ KM Rengarajoo, interviewed by Tan Beng Luan, *Oral History Department*, 2 Aug. 1984, Reel 1.

³⁹ Mohinder Singh, interviewed by Pitt Kuan Wah, *Oral History Department*, 6 Apr. 1985, Reel 11.

⁴⁰ HE Wilson, *The Klang Strikes of 1941* (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1981), p.6.

⁴¹ Rai, p.176.

⁴² Wilson, p.6.

⁴³ Michael Stenson, *Class, Race & Colonialism in Peninsular Malaysia* (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2019), pp.63-68.

⁴⁴ Rengarajoo, Reel 2.

invoke explicit anti-colonial rhetoric - considering the surveillance remits it functioned within, it nevertheless drew symbolic legitimacy from the Indian National Congress. Following Abul Kalam Azad's election as the Congress President in India, for instance, Goho reminded Indians they were 'sons of India' and that 'free India would be Britain's best friend'.⁴⁵ However, as the accounts of civilians like Mohinder Singh suggest, the anti-British sentiments of Indian groups like the IYL were intentionally 'not in the open so that the British could not do anything'.⁴⁶

Physical sites were also crucial to producing inclusive diasporic spaces that transcended ethno-linguistic divides and represented a microcosm of the pan-Indian identity. One such site in the heart of Singapore was Ramakrishna Mission - a Hindu reformist group based at Norris Road, which was uniquely composed of north, south, and even Peranakan Indians in its leadership. Moreover, at a time when sub-nationalist actors like some Tamil politicians promoted Tamil over Hindi, the RKM ran two Tamil schools - the Vivekananda and Saradamani, and educated labourers, alongside its English and Hindi engagements.⁴⁷ This made its physicality central to Indian imaginaries of diasporic homing in the city - which Fortier defines as the 'desire to feel at home by physically or symbolically (re)constituting spaces for ontological security'.⁴⁸

This element of affective Indian-ness is best evidenced through its public engagements. RKM as a site became a key space where Tamil, English, Hindi and Malayalam co-existed at a public level and was promoted via festivals and lectures. The growing frequency of public lectures on topics like 'Freedom of Asia' and 'India's Present Needs' attracted regular advertisements and civilian participation and established the RKM premises as a focal meeting point for the Indian community.⁴⁹ This was reflected, for instance, when even overseas visitors from Burma sought to use this space to speak to the Indian community about the need for greater Indo-Burmese cooperation in the wartime.⁵⁰ Moreover, RKM was also entangled in political pan-Indianism and in 1940, began operating its first off-site premise in Penang to extend vernacular classes.⁵¹

This means that RKM was central to a pan-Indian basis of cultural nationalism that bridged the ethno-linguistic divides. However, like the political identities of contemporary Indian societies,

⁴⁵ 'Indian Youths Send Message to Moulana', *Malaya Tribune*, 4 March 1940.

⁴⁶ Mohinder Singh, Reel 11.

⁴⁷ *The Tenth General Report of the Ramakrishna Mission* (Belur Math, 1940), pp.60-61.

⁴⁸ Anne-Marie Fortier, 'Queer Diaspora' in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, ed. by D. Richardson and S. Seidman (Sage, 2002), pp.183-198.

⁴⁹ 'Ramakrishna Mission Lectures', *The Straits Times*, 27 May 1939.; 'Woman to Lecture on India's Present Needs', *Malaya Tribune*, 12 June 1940.

⁵⁰ 'Co-operation of India & Burma', *The Straits Times*, 15 October 1940.

⁵¹ 'Ramakrishna Centre for Penang', *The Straits Budget*, 25 Apr. 1940.

this engagement did not automatically imply an anti-colonial bent. This is important, especially in light of the status of Singapore - and that of wider Malaya, as a space of settlement in migrant imaginaries. As Lin argues, ‘Indians simultaneously reaffirmed ethnic pride and their sense of being ‘Malayan’’.⁵² Notably, this also extended to Peranakan Indians, who comprised a locally born group of Indian settlers in Singapore and Malaya and whose leader MT Pillay was part of the RKM leadership.⁵³ Essentially, then, RKM was integral in embedding pan-Indianism into everyday social and cultural activities of Indian civilians in Singapore. This legitimacy allowed it to remain active even post-1942 as the standalone cultural centre functional during Japanese occupation, which even disrupted activities of Arya Samaj, and position itself as central to the later nationalist movement as a nodal space for welfare and nationalist and cultural education.

Ultimately, then, pan-Indianism in Singapore was a civilian-led move consolidated in the form of labour networks and community spaces. While Singapore’s colonial governance and its centrality to Indian migrant imaginaries as a space of settlement meant pan-Indianism did not emerge purely as an anti-colonial identity, it became a politically functional basis for communal representation before the Japanese occupied the city in 1942. In fact, for Indian civilians, this representative basis was crucial to negotiating the imperatives of the new political order, driven by a need to protect ‘life and property’.⁵⁴ For instance, by insisting that ‘India’s Independence is Indians’ affair, not a Japanese affair’ - a statement made by KPK Menon on behalf of Indians at the first meeting with Japanese Major Fujiwara, civilian actors both de-legitimised Japanese authority on the Indian question as well as reinforced the political autonomy of their communal identity.⁵⁵ If anything, the Indian Independence League, formalised at the Bangkok Conference, replicated the leadership and social base of this diasporic public sphere already functioning in Singapore, while accentuating its anti-colonial expression instead of freshly consolidating it.

⁵² Lin, p.283.

⁵³ ‘Ramakrishna Mission’, *The Sunday Tribune*, 4 June 1939.

⁵⁴ Rai, p.210.

⁵⁵ KR Menon, interviewed by Chua Ser Koon, *Oral History Department*, 21 May 1982, Reel 4.

Anti-Colonialism in Bangkok, 1940-42

Unlike Singapore, scholarship on Indian civilians in Bangkok between 1940 and 1942 is few and far between. Bangkok's centrality to the historical memory of the nationalist movement is attributed to the launch of Indian Independence League at a conference held between 15th and 23rd June 1942. Coordinated to 'bring all Indians of East Asia under one umbrella', this moment sought to formalise the relationship between the nascent INA and civilians in Southeast Asia.⁵⁶ However, this exclusive focus on the League and its Japanese entanglements has relegated any interrogation of how local civilians articulated subversive, anti-colonial politics in the Bangkok locale and even confronted and shaped the political identity that the IIL eventually embraced.

Bangkok's Indian community was different to that of Singapore. While there is a debate over the total number of Indians in Thailand by 1940, given the lack of a formal census base, scholars like Bruce Reynolds have estimated it at 40,000.⁵⁷ The community was commercially inclined and comprised middle-class migrants engaged in trade. Despite being outside a formal colonial space, however, the social position of Indians remained unsatisfactory. Thai nationalist rhetoric derided Indians as 'moneygrubbers who did not assimilate culturally'.⁵⁸ Perhaps, this had to do with how Indian migrants thought about Bangkok. Unlike Malaya, where locally born Indians were a distinct demographic, Bangkok's community was defined by transience, as an 'average resident regards India as home and returns after few years'.⁵⁹ Port records in Bangkok between 1920 and 1933 show that for every 500 Indians who came annually, 300 left.⁶⁰ This circulatory pattern of migration is further reinforced by its gendered nature. In 1931-32, of 1,333 arrivals, 1178 were working aged men and only 49 married and 17 unmarried females accompanied.⁶¹

That is not to say that there were no second-generation Indians. However, the predominance of first-generation migrants is crucial to interrogate the growth of a distinct brand of subversive anti-colonialism closely tied to Indian political traditions and developments rather than being concerned with consolidating a national identity like in Singapore. Equally, the importance of Bangkok's independence in sustaining continuities in anti-colonial politics - as this chapter will show, needs to be accounted seriously. The absence of any focus on the space and the nature of

⁵⁶ Kesar Singh Giani, *Indian Independence Movement in East Asia* (Singh Brothers, 1947), pp.60-64.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, p.170.

⁵⁸ Reynolds, p.170.

⁵⁹ 'Indian Minorities in South and East Asia', *Office of Strategic Services*, R&A 1595, 8 Sept. 1944, p.13.

⁶⁰ R&A 1595, p.12.

⁶¹ R&A 1595, p.13.

migration in existing literature means that the manner in which civilians expressed their anti-colonial politics in the Bangkok locale is under-theorised. This chapter addresses this gap.

Sikhs were a notable part of the community. In Phahurat or 'Little India', they had founded the Singh Sabha - a Gurdwara that was both a site of community assembly and worship.⁶² On the 5th of September 1941 - a month before the first contact with Fujiwara, Pritam Singh - a Sikh missionary from the Singh Sabha, wrote a letter to troops in Malaya (Figure 1).⁶³ Writing under a religious letterhead, he urged Indian troops to follow the 'Indian National Congress under the Saint Gandhi' and to 'never obey English commands to attack Thailand and never fight Japan, Germany or any country who is enemy of British, as such countries are our indirect friends'.

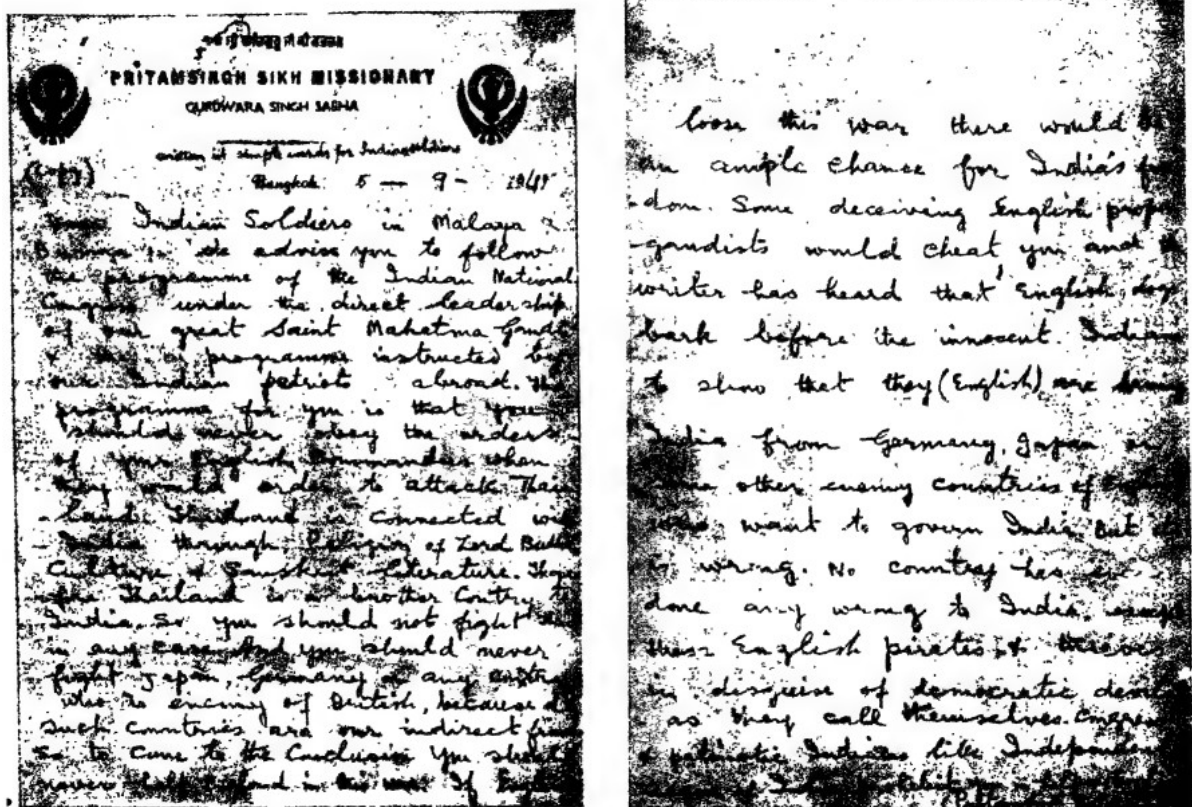


Figure 1: Pritam Singh's letter, 5-9-1941.⁶⁴

Singh's letter reads out of place for a missionary, unless it is situated within the cultural register of the transnational Ghadar movement. A product of the anarchist school, Ghadar was led by exiled revolutionaries and Sikh activists to liberate India using 'uprising, armed resistance, and

⁶² Pimmanus Wibulsilp, 'The Ghadar Movement in Thailand, 1914-1917', *Manusya: Journal of Humanities*, 26.1 (2024), pp.1-19, doi.org:10.1163/26659077-26010017.

⁶³ Joyce Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan* (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015), pp.4-5.

⁶⁴ Giani, p.17.

defection of troops' during the First World War.⁶⁵ Intelligence records indicate that Bangkok was a key base in Southeast Asia from 1915-17. As Pimmanus Wibulsilp shows, local Indians were heavily involved in Ghadar and the Singh Sabha and several Sikh-run restaurants were nodal sites 'to exchange information and collect arms'.⁶⁶ Although the British forced Thailand to deport some suspects, this relation was fraught with tensions, meaning several suspects were never arrested and lived in Bangkok, since they were not 'dangerous to Thai state and people'.⁶⁷

Pritam Singh and the Singh Sabha were both part of this Ghadar ecosystem. Although not part of the movement itself, Pritam had been a nationalist in India and was under the tutelage of one Amar Singh in Bangkok.⁶⁸ Amar himself had been part of the Ghadar and a note prepared by the US Office of Strategic Services identified him as a key leader who was arrested for seeking to 'acquire 100,000 rifles from Germany during the great war'.⁶⁹ Singh Sabha had been central to the Ghadar movement, being the first place where revolutionaries 'made contact with other collaborators' in Bangkok.⁷⁰ During Pritam Singh's time, the Sabha resurged in importance as the nodal site for the promotion of anti-British propaganda through leafletting and carrying out attempts to defect Indian troops - like addressing letters, as Thailand's political independence implied this could be done freely within the community and with 'less fear than elsewhere'.⁷¹

This explains the letter's invocation of Ghadarite ideology, including the emphasis on defection and external collaboration. Indeed, when Fujiwara met Singh, the latter told him that there were already 'two Indian organisations: the Independent League of Sikhs, and an Indo-Thai cultural organisation run by a Swami'.⁷² Fujiwara also alluded to the movement's manpower in his memoir and noted that the 'Sikh and his cohorts already had men across Southern Thailand and north-east Malayan cities...already distributing propaganda leaflets among Indian officers and men in the British-Indian Army in the border states'.⁷³ Motivated by the prospect of expanding

⁶⁵ Maia Ramnath, 'Two Revolutions: The Ghadar Movement and India's Radical Diaspora, 1913-1918', *Radical History Review*, 92 (2005), pp.7-30.

⁶⁶ Wibulsilp, pp.8-10.

⁶⁷ Wibulsilp, p.16.

⁶⁸ Giani, p.16.

⁶⁹ R&A 1595, p.17.

⁷⁰ Wibulsilp, p.8.

⁷¹ Azharudin Mohamed Dali, 'The INA's Secret War and the Sikhs in Southeast Asia during World War II', *SARJANA University of Malaya*, 23.1 (2008), pp.38-51.

⁷² Lebra, p.5.

⁷³ Ibid.

the propaganda already being carried out, the group collaborated with Japanese under Fujiwara and even established contact with German Intelligence through Thomas, an envoy, in 1941.⁷⁴

In essence, then, Pritam and Amar Singh were both part of an ecosystem where the anti-colonial underground was part of everyday life. In fact, there were significant continuities between the Ghadar and the Independent League of the Sikhs in terms of the community sites used - like Gurdwara Singh Sabha, and the political mechanisms, including emphasising the collaboration with 'friendly' powers. Crucially, by drawing on Ghadar articulations, these community spaces also maintained links to revolutionary groups in East Asia like one '*ghadar party*' in Shanghai led by Baba Osman Khan.⁷⁵ Moreover, Bangkok's political independence itself facilitated this continuity of Indian underground politics, as surviving Ghadar migrants from WWI and their nodal spaces remained embedded in the community outside any overt colonial surveillance.

However, Sikh anti-colonialism was not the only element of civilian nationalism in Bangkok. Indeed, Bangkok had a second set of nationalist thought that operated parallel to the Ghadarite ambitions and benefitted from the sudden consciousness of national identity set into motion by the wartime reversal of social status of Indians. In his memoir, M. Sivaram - an Indian journalist in Bangkok, gives an account of how the collapse of the pre-war racialised hierarchies was felt:

'It was incredible - Indians being treated with consideration and respect, while Britons dragged out and driven to prisons; the Indian coolie going about free while the British *Tuan Besar* (Big Master) slapped in the face [...] It seemed the coloured man - black, brown, and yellow - had come into his own [...] the Indian, hitherto a fourth rater among foreigners, was now equal to the best among first raters! [...] Across Malay Peninsula (including South Thailand), the soiled turban, the dirty dhoti and the dark-brown face of the *kerala krani* (white-collar worker) became objects of special consideration, while a sari, hung along the veranda to dry, suddenly blazoned safety for any household'.⁷⁶

For many civilians, this wartime social status elevation was more immediate for politicisation of their consciousness than anything else. Almost 30,000 Indians came together to immediately form the Indian National Council under Swami Satyananda Puri - a Bengali professor who had been leading the Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge dedicated to promoting cultural nationalism and

⁷⁴ 'Study of German Intelligence Activities in the Near East and Related Areas prior to and during World War II', *Central Intelligence Agency*, pp.49-97.

⁷⁵ Giani, p.16.

⁷⁶ M. Sivaram, *The Road to Delhi* (Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1966), p.33.

better ties between India and Thailand.⁷⁷ Even before the Japanese forced an alliance upon Thai authorities, Indian civilians regarded the Lodge as an expression of their national identity - in 1940, for instance, when Puri opened the Lodge, the hoisting of the Indian National Flag in its premises was seen by many including Raghunath Sharma - a local leader of the Hindu Sabha that provided vernacular education, as a 'landmark moment in the history of overseas Indians' battle for their Motherland's freedom'.⁷⁸ While for community leaders like Sharma, this act of flag-hoisting was intrinsically tied to a nationalist expression, other Indians, including business leaders who elected Puri as President of the National Council, were more driven by a conscious choice to benefit from expressing their Indian-ness in the new political landscape of Bangkok.

As first-generation migrants who maintained familial links back home, the politics of the Indian National Congress was ingrained in the community's consciousness in Bangkok. For some like Puri himself, who had 'made over his property to the Congress' before coming to Bangkok, it was the most familiar form of nationalist politics and the one that most closely enabled them to associate with domestic Indian developments.⁷⁹ This was distinct from the Singaporean pan-Indian politics that was tied to civic representation in the port-city itself. In fact, this confidence in the Congress was a key enabling factor behind Puri's confidence in Subhas Chandra Bose - a former INC President, who he recurrently urged must be contacted to align with INC's vision of independence and not be reduced to 'Japanese Quislings'.⁸⁰ Even following his death in an air-crash in 1942, the popular reception of the Congress forced Rashbehari Bose - who came from a revolutionary school that disagreed with the Congress, to legitimise the movement by proclaiming it as an extension of the Congress in the diaspora. As Zardas Lee has shown, the INA post-1942 created a linear narrative that placed it as part of the Congress politics and every INA member was a 'Congressite at heart' and 'member of the Congress' by extension.⁸¹ While Lee rescues the role of Rashbehari in formulating the political identity of INA, contextualising the uncanny relationship with the National Congress in light of the political consciousness of first-generation migrants in Bangkok enables civilian actors to be repositioned in this history as central not just to the movement's structural foundations but its political identity altogether.

In conclusion, the Indian migrant imaginations of Bangkok and the spatial character of the city determined the (re)emergence of nationalist consciousness amongst civilians. While on the one

⁷⁷ 'Activities of Indians in Thailand', *The Syonan Shimbun*, 20 May 1942.

⁷⁸ Netaji Papers, File No. MEA-24(37)-EA-57, pp.119-121.

⁷⁹ R&A 1595, p.18.

⁸⁰ Giani, pp.34-35.

⁸¹ Zardas Shuk-man Lee, 'The Indian National Army and the Making of Indian Nationalism in Japanese-Occupied Malaya', *The Historical Journal*, 68 (2025), pp.837-56, doi.org:10.1017/S0018246X24000694.

hand, Thai independence allowed existing civilian anti-colonial networks like Ghadarites to operate in a subterranean manner based out of the Sikh community across decades, ‘connecting two periods of Indian Independence movements in Thailand - WWI and WWII’, the transience of Bangkok for first-generation migrants enabled the National Council to be directly modelled after the politics of the Congress.⁸² Crucially, this not only provided the movement’s structural base but also enabled civilians to shape its political identity. Read together with the first chapter, this helps reject the homogeneity with which Southeast Asia features in the dominant literature and re-configures Indian civilian long-distance nationalism as a locally contingent expression.

⁸² Wibulsilp, p.13.

Participation and Propaganda: Women and Children, 1943-44

‘These stupid women...are they going to fight for Independence?’

This remark, recollected by Janaki Thevar, was directed at recruits of the all-female Rani Jhansi Regiment in Singapore in 1943.⁸³ RJR was one of the primary ways in which civilians - mostly women like Janaki who moved to Singapore to join as *Ranis*, engaged with the movement, the other being the affective political participation of children through parades, performances, and groups like the *Balak Sena*. So far, this thesis has shown how civilian actors shaped the locally contingent and heterogeneous emergence of nationalism in Singapore and Bangkok from 1940-42. Turning now to the IIL-led phase between 1943 and 1944, this chapter contends that even for peripheral civilian actors like marginalised women - especially from plantation-estates, and children, participation was neither uniform nor marked by any shared nationalist sentiment but reflected their individual situational and conscious expressions of agency and positionalities.

Firstly, the chapter interrogates the lived experience of women, using popular material practices like jewellery donation to recover their plural motivations and consciousnesses. It argues that despite mainstream representations of jewellery donations as women’s patriotic gifts, different women sought to do different things through the act of donation, often conditioned along caste and class identities. Doing so rectifies the neglect of material practices in the existing literature and the consequent invisibility of women’s plural agency. Then, it turns to children, examining both carefully preserved personal photographs as well as their mediated voices. This recovers them as agentic actors whose navigation of daily life reflected a conscious sense of collective self-hood and rejection of age constraints, even as they stayed central to outreach propaganda.

As early as 1942, Checha Davies - a middle-class reformer and member of the Singapore Indian Association, conceptualised nationalism as a uniquely gender-shared space that welcomed both men and women as equals as anti-colonialism ‘is no fight with any distinction between women and men, and women must work shoulder-to-shoulder with men for India’.⁸⁴ This egalitarian consciousness was also echoed when RJR was formed, with its eponym Rani Lakshmibai being a heroine from the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and much of its educated, officer-class legitimising it as part of a history of Indian women’s anti-colonial engagement, drawing on the traditional ‘*Virangana* - warrior woman exhibiting heroism’.⁸⁵ This was because of how well plugged into

⁸³ Janaki Thevar, interviewed by Shompa Lahiri, 8 May 2009, as quoted in Lahiri, p.608.

⁸⁴ ‘Women of India Urged To Take Up British Challenge’, *The Syonan Shimbun*, 28 Aug. 1942.

⁸⁵ Lahiri, p.609.

anti-colonialism these women were. In her testimony, for instance, Lakshmi Sahgal - the RJR leader, reflected on how her exposure to women Congress leaders had influenced her, including her mother and Sarojini Naidu's sister, who 'used to stay with us and influenced me greatly'.⁸⁶

This appeal of anti-colonialism as a space for women's political engagement was not something that the vast majority of the 'dark-skinned, low-caste and uneducated' women from the estates had experienced.⁸⁷ Even then, these women formed nearly 60% of the RJR and despite being excluded from the regimental leadership which was reserved for 'smart, intelligent, and well-educated girls', often participated with great vigour and enthusiasm.⁸⁸ While a dearth of direct testimonies from these subaltern women means that it is impossible to fully recover their voices and lived experience, existing archival evidence capture glimpses of their plural consciousness.

Elitist accounts of educated women like Lakshmi or Dato' Bhupalan - whom Datta interviewed between 2011 and 2013, paint a survival narrative by arguing that estate women flocked to the movement to escape 'a superior, inflexible hold that men had over their bodies'.⁸⁹ This rhetoric emerges in the context of the aftermath of the Occupation in 1942, which disrupted the existing hierarchies in the plantation estates and rendered women vulnerable to sexual exploitation both within their domestic spaces and workplace.⁹⁰ However, this narrative remains as androcentric and reductive of the situational agency of these women as the nationalist narratives, with both reducing women to either passive victims or receptors of men's activities and disempowering them by characterising them as '*objects* of plantation economy, patriarchy, and nationalism'.⁹¹

One of the notable ways in which women - both from the estates and the urban space, engaged with the movement is through the material act of jewellery donations. Within both oral accounts and surviving material artefacts relating to the movement, these donated ornaments occupy an important place. Joginder Singh, who heard Bose at twenty-four, recollects that 'women simply removed all jewellery when Bose spoke and threw them at his feet. That was their contribution toward his effort'.⁹² At the inauguration of RJR, the *Syonan Shimbun* reported that 'jewellery literally flowed' after the addresses.⁹³ Furthermore, as the Netaji files indicate, amongst the last possessions of Bose recovered after his crash in August, 1945 was a 'treasure chest' containing

⁸⁶ Lakshmi Sahgal, interviewed by Irene Lim Ai Lin, *Oral History Department*, 23 Aug. 1990, Reel 2.

⁸⁷ Hildebrand, p.31.

⁸⁸ Sahgal, Reel 2.

⁸⁹ Datta, p.137.

⁹⁰ Ravindra K. Jain, *South Indians on the Plantation Frontier in Malaya* (Yale University Press, 1970).

⁹¹ Datta, p.138.

⁹² Joginder Singh, interviewed by Low Lay Leng, *Oral History Department*, 16 Nov. 1983, Reel 9.

⁹³ 'Subhas Bose Opens Rani of Jhansi Training Camp Amid Great Patriotism', *The Syonan Shimbun*, 23 Oct. 1943.

numerous ‘charred and broken jewellery like earrings, bangles, rings, pendants, nose-rings, and necklaces worn by women’.⁹⁴ Despite the centrality of jewellery to women’s participation in the movement, no scholarly attention has been given to this material practice, rendering women who expressed their agency through these objects largely invisible to historical scholarship.



Figure 2: Recovered Jewellery.⁹⁵

In South Asian families, women share an intimate relationship with jewellery since ‘it is their most important form of personal wealth and asset’.⁹⁶ This attachment is retained in the diaspora, given jewellery’s affixed cultural connotations as female property, enabling women to maintain access to ‘some personal property’ even within a patriarchal framework.⁹⁷ Amid the disruptions in wartime Southeast Asia, the importance of jewellery as an economic asset compounded, not just for the woman herself but also for her family. Khatijun Nissa Siraj, for instance, remembers how she and her family hid jewellery worth ‘hundreds and thousands’ in a pot to avoid being looted, since if ‘Japanese took (them) away, we would be finished’.⁹⁸ As such, reducing the act of jewellery donation - something so integral to women’s everyday identities, to a spontaneous patriotic urge, relegates the important, context-specific rationality embedded in these decisions.

⁹⁴ Netaji Papers, File No. 25/4/NGO-Volume III, pp.90-92.; Netaji Papers, File No. 25/4/NGO-Volume I.

⁹⁵ National Archives of India, as provided by Sumeru Roy Chaudhury, ‘The Tale of Netaji’s Missing Treasures and the Nehru Govt’s Refusal To Recover Them’, *The Wire*, 20 Aug. 2021, <https://thewire.in/history/the-tale-of-netajis-missing-treasures-and-the-nehru-govts-refusal-to-recover-them> [accessed: 12 Apr. 2026].

⁹⁶ Mehrotra, pp.27-39.; Ajay Gandhi ‘A Superlative Form: How Gold Mediates Personhood and Property in Mumbai’, *Etnofoor*, 25.1 (2013), pp.91-110.

⁹⁷ Mehrotra, p.28.

⁹⁸ Khatijun Nissa Siraj, interviewed by Ruzita Zaki, *Oral History Department*, 4 Aug. 1995, Reel 13.

For estate women, in particular, despite the existing hardships, letting go of such an important asset often stemmed from entirely individual or family circumstances. Pachaimmal and Pushpa, whose families had been living on the estates, recollect, for instance, that their donations were in line with the family's strategic embrace of INA and RJR identities to 'secure benefits outside the reach of most women'.⁹⁹ In an environment where food security, work, and care were absent from the estates, donating jewellery enabled the estate women to consciously re-negotiate their circumstances and seek better lives. As surviving evidence (Fig. 2) suggests, the 'treasure chest' comprised very common, everyday ornaments - so much that Jawaharlal Nehru called it a 'poor show of cheap jewellery'.¹⁰⁰ However, the centrality of these ordinary items to the movement's diasporic popular consciousness - promoted through news like *Syonan Shimbun* and *Azad Hind* and speeches, provided these subaltern women a remarkably accessible way to benefit from being part of this popular consciousness. Not everyone who donated enlisted in the RJR. Hence, while Pachaimmal donated her jewellery, her family remained averse to enlistment. Others who 'donated all savings' chose to 'cook, stitch, and care for the sick' instead, while drawing regular salaries at par with male counterparts.¹⁰¹ By the end of 1943, for instance, while IIL acquired a sum of nearly '86,310 dollars of jewellery' from the predominantly labouring population in Malaya, the difficulty in convincing women to actively enlist in combat training was far from over.¹⁰² This confirms that jewellery donation remained a rational, agentic political expression with the movement driven by women's own calculations of the precarities, costs, and benefits.

That is not to suggest that the idea of combat was altogether absent from jewellery donations. Indeed, at a speech in Singapore, Netaji recalled a 15-year girl for whom renouncing jewellery was tied to the rejection of traditional femininity and her domesticated identity. By giving up her ornaments, the girl stated that 'I am dead to the family and reborn to serve Mother India'.¹⁰³ Others, like an unnamed Gujarati woman, donated all jewellery to join RJR, a regiment that by itself prohibited jewellery and required women to perform 'transgressive role of the masculine soldier' by abandoning ornaments.¹⁰⁴ Crucially, this means that for different women, the act of letting go of jewellery meant different things. Class and caste identities, along with individual positionalities, shaped what women sought to achieve through the donation. While some sought to consciously assert female parity with male counterparts by rejecting conventional spaces in

⁹⁹ Pachaimmal, interviewed by Arunima Datta, 10 May 2011, as quoted in Datta, pp.140-141.; Pushpa, interviewed by Arunima Datta, 10 May 2011, as quoted in Datta, pp.140-141.

¹⁰⁰ MEA-25-4-NGO-Vol. I, p.38.

¹⁰¹ Meenachi Perumal, interviewed by Arunima Datta, 18 June 2017, as quoted in Datta, p.142.

¹⁰² Giani, p.102.

¹⁰³ Giani, p.87.

¹⁰⁴ Yasmin Khan, *The Raj At War* (The Bodley Head, 2015), p.217.

the form of the domestic household and kitchen, many subaltern women leveraged the donation to re-negotiate their precarious lived realities amid intense hardship and great food scarcity.¹⁰⁵

Just as women were consciously expressing themselves, so too were children, whose identity as the future generation that would ‘shoulder maintenance of independent India’ was key to the movement’s legitimacy among urban families.¹⁰⁶ Sköld and Söderlind’s study of politicisation of children in Sweden and Finland during WWII has suggested how children navigated their identities as both ‘agentic subjects and objects of political propaganda’.¹⁰⁷ This is instructive in the context of the IIL, since it enables the recovery of children’s agency while not isolating their expressions from the ecosystems that leveraged them for public propaganda. This means that while children’s portrayal in the public sphere through newspapers and photos constituted important affective outreach, children themselves cannot be reduced to mere extensions of their ecosystems, since their voices and material recollections - like preserving photos in uniform, helps recover a sense of collective identity and agency despite the largely propagandic framing. However, it is worth noting that this is largely representative of a middle-class base of children who operated within schools and camps in urban centres like Bangkok and Singapore and given the movement’s territorial reach, did not always extend to working-class families on the rubber estates the same way that the women’s movement explicitly recruited from these plantations.

Schools were key sites that mediated this engagement. Amongst others, the National School at Ramakrishna Mission premises on 9, Norris Road, and Tamil schools that organised nationalist choirs, were prominent. At a time when the Japanese actively controlled schools and pushed for a Nipponization of education to create ideal subjects for the imperial city in Syonan, Indian school children’s promotion of Indian nationalism through public spectacles like parades, plays and essay competitions tacitly challenged this policy by ‘undercutting Japan’s efforts to instil loyalty towards Japan’.¹⁰⁸ The affective nationalism promoted by these children was a subject of frequent popular discourse. In 1943, when 800 RKM students marched to the headquarters of IIL in Singapore, the *Syonan Shimbun* described the public spectacle as causing ‘tremendous enthusiasm in the community, as tiny hands waved tricolour flags’ and were accorded a grand reception, entrusted with singing *Vande Mataram*, and saluting the national flag.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, *Azad Hind* regularly featured student engagement with nationalism through essay competitions

¹⁰⁵ Giani, p.88.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Parents Urged to Send Sons to Balak Sena’, *Azad Hind*, 17 Nov. 1944.

¹⁰⁷ Sköld and Söderlind, p.19.

¹⁰⁸ Edgar Bolun Liao, ‘Creating and Mobilizing “Syonan” Youth: Youth and the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, 1942-1945’, *Archipel*, 102 (2021), pp.65-97, doi.org:10.4000/archipel.2620.

¹⁰⁹ ‘Indian Children Hold Rally in Syonan’, *The Syonan Shimbun*, 12 Apr. 1943.

on topics like ‘Netaji and the Indian Independence Movement’, which were coordinated across schools and enabled students to articulate their views in several languages under competition environments.¹¹⁰ While these scripts are unrecoverable, they nonetheless suggest that children were both writing down their distinct ideas, while also being part of the affective propaganda.

There are other instances where children have reinforced an autonomous sense of agency and retrospective accounts reflect on their shared fictive kinship with their compatriots. *Balak Sena* - a boy scouts’ group launched in 1944 across four sites, including in Singapore and Bangkok, is a case in point.¹¹¹ Figure 3 is a group-photo of the Singapore Balak Sena that remained with members of the group, like Kishore Bhattacharya and Bala Chandra, as a carefully preserved artefact and was also given to Prime Minister Nehru in 1946 as evidence of their engagement.¹¹² Learning and exercising with other children in Balak Sena camps enabled children to transcend age-related bounds within the family and develop an identity of adventurism and ambition.



Figure 3: Balak Sena, 1944 and Kishore Bhattacharya (right).

This was expressed in two ways. First, through the distinct white and black outfits, which were as much part of the camp ritual as well as a communal identity. On the right in the Figure 3, for instance, is Kishore Bhattacharya photographed with his uncle in their respective outfits. Oral accounts, like Ishwal Lall Singh, also reflect on how the outfit was tied to students’ identities as much as military outfits represented cadets and evidenced their engagement through public parades, which is something Giani further shows in the instance of Bangkok.¹¹³ Second, this

¹¹⁰ ‘Indian National School Sponsors Essay Contest’, *Azad Hind*, 14 Oct. 1944.

¹¹¹ Giani, pp.134-136.

¹¹² MEA-SIN/P/162/7/2012, p.93.

¹¹³ Ishwal Lall Singh, interviewed by Raaj, *Oral History Department*, 4 May 2017, Reel 5.; Giani, p.105.

identity was cultivated by articulating a sense of collective self-hood. Bala Chandra recollects, for instance, that he and his friends ‘became famous’ after a performance on Bhagat Singh and how that enabled them to tour Seletar and Bidadari in lorries, even under wartime conditions.¹¹⁴ Similarly, for others like Raj Sachdev, their imagined proximity to INA, even though an uneasy relationship for contemporaneous parents, enabled them to view themselves beyond their age as actors who meaningfully contributed at par with adults.¹¹⁵ Children formed such camaraderie that many, like Sachdev and Tilak Pahwa and Chandra and Bhattacharya, continued to remain friends after the movement, leveraging camp networks to transcend family identities that they were immediately tied to because of their age. For some like Bala Chandra, who joined the movement against his family’s wishes, this was especially meaningful.¹¹⁶ Hence, despite being ingrained within the movement’s public propaganda, children were not just passive receptors of nationalism but were proactive political agents who co-produced a space of their own that reflected a collective self-hood and helped them transcend immediate familial dependencies.

In conclusion, then, foregrounding the voices of peripheral actors like women and children help dismantle the uniform nationalist impulse that has been attributed to civilian engagement with the nationalist movement. Instead, whether women leveraged jewellery donation to either reject domestication or re-negotiate their lived circumstances and children leveraged the nationalist space to cultivate a collective consciousness, this civilian participation remained conscious and agentic and shaped by personal and situationally rational ends. A counter-archive comprising oral histories and material culture like donated jewellery and photographs enables the recovery of this oppositional agency to the homogeneity of wartime propaganda and situates expressions and modalities of civilian actors within their social identities, lived positionality, and contexts.

Conclusion

This research set out to recover the importance of the Indian diaspora - specifically civilians in the diaspora, to the nationalist movement in wartime Southeast Asia between 1940 and 1944. Through a sustained analysis of oral testimonies, spatial microhistories, and material evidence like the donated jewellery and photographs, it has demonstrated that civilian participation was crucial in negotiating the movement’s structural and political identities. This reframes civilian

¹¹⁴ Netaji Papers, File No. MEA-SIN/P/162/7/2012, p.93.

¹¹⁵ Lekha Shankar, ‘My Memories of him will never fade: Bose’s boy scout’, *Deccan Chronicle*, 22 Mar. 2022, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/opinion/columnists/230322/lekha-shankar-my-memories-of-him-will-never-fade-bose-boy-scout.html> [accessed 20 Apr. 2026].; Azad Hind, 17 Nov. 1944

¹¹⁶ MEA-SIN/P/162/7/2012, p.93.

actors as irreducible to the existing historiographical binaries of ‘Renegades or Liberators?’ in military-centric histories of this movement as well as outside their characterisation as passive acolytes of Subhas Chandra Bose’s political career and vision within nationalist narratives.¹¹⁷ Instead, as this dissertation has shown, modalities of civilian participation were heterogeneous, situationally contingent, and consciously shaped by identities like class, caste, gender, and age.

Throughout, it has become evident that theorising the diaspora as an active, analytical category enables two main things in this dissertation’s context. Firstly, it helps revise the homogeneity of Southeast Asia as a singular diasporic category, that dominates the approach of much of the literature and repositions the centrality of the socio-political character of diasporic spaces and Indian migrant imaginations to the emergence of nationalist consciousness and structural and political pan-Indian public spheres in the Singapore and Bangkok locales. Secondly, by using a counter-archival methodological intervention that places oral history interviews in dialogic relation with material culture like jewellery, it foregrounds the conscious political negotiation of peripheral actors like subaltern estate women and children through quotidian practices, that reflect their divergent identities and positionality in the diaspora. Crucially, recovering civilian voices corrects the uniform reception of Netaji’s charisma and vision stressed in the literature and rectifies the virtual absence of the processes and articulations of children’s participation.

There is a compelling need for future studies to further interrogate the relationship this thesis has illuminated between civilian agency and quotidian practices - such as between women and jewellery donation and children and their public performances. Recovering these expressions more fully will require a wider archival basis - including more vernacular recollections, that is beyond this dissertation’s scope, but are integral for any comprehensive recovery of peripheral voices. Equally, the analytical framework employed in this thesis - employing social identities like gender, caste, class, and age as constitutive aspects of situational motivations and political participation, merits more attention. Moreover, the counter-archival methodology that has been leveraged throughout - placing oral histories in dialogue with the material culture and records to recover voices of peripheral actors excluded from archival documents, can be engaged with and further developed in scholarship seeking to recover the political subjectivities of civilians in similar historical contexts, beyond the work’s immediate South and Southeast Asian focus.

¹¹⁷ Ian Nish and Mark Allen, *War, Conflict and Security in Japan and Asia Pacific, 1941-1952: The Writings of Louis Allen* (Brill, 2011), pp.277-284.

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