

Laxmi Panda : The Forgotten Soldier of a Lost Army

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*When you go home, tell
them of us and say,
for your tomorrow, we gave
our today'.*

This is the thoughtful epitaph that is inscribed on the plaque at the Indian National Army' Memorial at Moirang near Manipur's capital Imphal. It was in Moirang that the flag of the Indian National Army was first hoisted on Indian soil on April 14, 1944.

As Indians, many of us fail to realise the impact of what these freedom fighters did for us nearly 65 years ago. The freedom that we take for granted today has been given to us by people who are no longer alive to tell us how they lived each day during those tough and trying times. We should remember not only those freedom fighters who are well known, but also those who died in the freedom struggle without having their names

honoured. Countless ordinary Indians have made sacrifices for our freedom. Our Independence was won due to the efforts of this silent army that trudged difficult paths and endured hardships, without a thought for praise or reward. As our glorious nation celebrates its 63rd Independence Anniversary, very few of these foot soldiers exist. Nearly all of that generation have died out. The living are old, ailing, distressed, lonely, and very, very disillusioned.

Such is the story of Laxmi Indira Panda. She was among the countless Indians who fought for the country's freedom. Laxmi Panda was one of the youngest members of Netaji Subash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army and the only Oriya woman to have enlisted.

Post the Great Famine of Orissa, the British were taking a lot of indentured labourers from Ganjam to the rubber plantations and railways being made in Burma. Huge contingents of labourers would be shipped out from the Gopalpur port and taken to Rangoon. From the period of 1880 to 1925, nearly 60,000 such workers were sent to Burma. Even today remnants of



them are found scattered all over the country. Laxmi Panda's parents too formed a part of this workers army.

Laxmi Rath was born sometime in 1930. She was born in a camp near Rangoon where her parents were engaged in the Railways being laid in Burma. She had early memories of the exploitation of the workers by the Gora Sahibs, and clearly recalled that she too was engaged in the job of cutting grass of the horses of the white supervisors.

When the Japanese overran parts of Burma in 1942, British air bombardments became a daily routine. Her father was employed by the local unit of Subash Bose's Indian National Army, and both her parents were killed in a British air raid. The young Laxmi Rath and her even younger brother were orphaned. The siblings were mute witnesses of the death of their parents.

The determination to avenge the death of her parents made her go to the nearby I.N.A. Camp where she begged for enrollment in the rank and file. The frail Laxmi was hardly fourteen years of age, and was refused by the Camp commanders. However she stayed put outside the Camp gates, and when Subash Bose came for inspection she blocked his way. She was personally taken aside to him, and her determination melted the hearts of the I.N.A. leaders.

She was taken in the Rani Jhansi Regiment under Captain Lakshmi Sehgal. Initially she was given soft jobs of housekeeping and cooking, but the young Laxmi soon proved her mettle and won the hearts of her superiors. She trained in swordsmanship, shooting and espionage. As she was well versant with the Burmese Language, she was often sent across enemy lines for recce and collection of intelligence. When I met her in 2007, she recollected working with the famous Janaki Thevar, Gown, Shah Nawaz Khan, Sehgal and Dhillon. Unfortunately, her brother soon went missing and was never found.

Laxmi Panda
recollected that Netaji



personally gave her a new name “Indira”, to avoid confusing her with the far more famous Lakshmi (Captain Lakshmi Sehgal). Netaji told her that in the I.N.A she would be henceforth known as Indira, and this name struck.

I met Captain Lakshmi Sehgal at Kanpur in June 2008. At the age of ninety three, she recollected this incident. I showed her Laxmi Panda’s photographs, nostalgia brought tears in her eyes. She vividly recollected Indira being the youngest soldier in her regiment.)

Six months of intensive arms training in Burma shaped Laxmi into battle readiness for the onward march to the battlefield on the India-Burma border. She recollected the war time incidents of travelling by

railways flatcars, the trenches and dugouts, the bombing sorties and the Japanese compatriots who fought alongside her. She was injured by shrapnel, the scars of which she still carried till her death.

Laxmi Panda recalled how Netaji had instructed her regiment to break into groups of 150 to move out of Rangoon when the INA was retreating. Laxmi was in the second group that was led by Janaki Thevar and had a rough retreat, their train was bombed and the women had to walk to Bangkok-it took 26 days of night marches braving bombs and machine guns firing at them. Food was scarce, they ate roots and boiled leaves. Many a time they went hungry for days, even eating the flesh of the pack horses that had died.

Laxmi was right by the side of Netaji up till the time he gave the call for disbandment of the I.N.A. She recollects seeing Netaji at Singapore on the 12th August 1945 : "I never saw him again. A week later, I heard that he had died in a plane crash," she said in an emotion ridden voice, and yes, she never believed that Netaji died as reported.

After the surrender of Singapore, the arrested members of the Indian National Army were classed as 'white', 'black', or 'grey' according to the perceived innocence or culpability of their motives. Laxmi Panda had been classified as white, meaning that she was a hardcore war criminal. Even the British Secret Service agents were baffled by this petite teenaged girl who had wielded .303 Lee Enfield rifles. They let her go free; even the British would not arrest persons who were less than 16 years of age. Laxmi then sailed back to India in a tramp steamer. At Chittagong harbour the British secret police once again arrested all the I.N.A soldiers, and Laxmi had vivid memories of throwing all her papers, medals and her I.N.A uniform overboard. She too was arrested again, but seeing her frail health and young age they let her go.

Laxmi went back to Burma, but she found that she was an alien there. Finding no one of her kin there, the young girl made her way back to Orissa, the home of her parents, a place that she had never seen, but only heard of. Most of the journey from Burma was on foot, however she remembers coming to Berhampur and with the help of a few I.N.A veterans got accommodation and work. She married another I.N.A veteran Khageswar Panda in 1951. Her husband got a job as a driver in Hirakud, where the big dam was being built, and the next few years were spent happily. Her troubles began after her husband died in 1976. Left all alone with an alcoholic son, she had to work as a domestic servant, a day labourer and a store attendant, working for a pittance to eke out a living.

The Government of Orissa recognized Laxmi Panda as a freedom fighter. This recognition entitled her to a meagre pension of Rs.1000/- every month. However freedom fighter status had been denied to her at the Centre despite several INA veterans, including Captain Lakshmi Sehgal corroborating her role. The fact that she had never been to jail was a lacunae. The British Secret Service agents,

who let the frail young girl go free from Chittagong harbour, did her a grave injustice. Had she been arrested, she would have been given a pension of at least Rs.15000/- per month, enough to meet her medical needs and keeping her no good son's extended family maintained.

I got references about her from the Netaji Research Bureau at Calcutta while I was doing a research on the I.N.A. during June 2007. The name of Laxmi Indira Panda had cropped up in many places, and a few local I.N.A veterans from Calcutta too had told me about her exploits in Burma. All I could gather was that she was a brave Oriya lady, who had fought alongside Netaji and Lakshmi Sehgal in Burma and had survived to come back. I was curious and eager to meet her, as she was the only Oriya lady to serve in the I.N.A.

It took me a full six months to locate her. I went to places afar as Berhampur, Hinjilicut, Phulbani, Angul and Paralakhemundi before I found her at Jeypore in Koraput. She was living in a small hut in a slum along with her son and his family. The one room broken down shanty in Nakarchi Street was home for a family of ten. She had languished in this slum

for years, stricken with poverty and ill health, but even this little comfort has been snatched away from her. Her alcoholic son had thrown her out, and this proud icon was spending her days (and nights) at different places, thanks to a few kind hearted benevolent persons.

The Collector of Koraput had allotted her a small piece of land to build her home, but this is little solace. At the age of eighty years, Laxmi Panda certainly could not build her home. She had to undergo an eye operation and kept very poor health.

For forty years this proud lady had been writing and petitioning to the union government to accord her rightful pension and give her the recognition that was due to her.

When I first met her in June 2007, she was a cynical and frustrated person, who had given up all hope. It took me a dozen visits to Jeypore before I could convince her that her fight could and would be continued. She told me that Giridhar Gamango, when he was the Chief Minister, sent her to Delhi for two weeks, but even his approach had been in vain. She showed me letters that were written by eminent persons including Lalit

Mansingh, the Army Chief, many Ministers, but nothing had been done.

I got word of this and rushed to Jeypore and with great difficulty convinced that I would take her battle to the powers that be at Delhi. I brought her back with me to Bhubaneswar and kept her with me. Her health improved and she was happy to meet all the people to flock to see her. I knew that it would be very difficult to present her case as she did not have any documents to prove her involvement in the INA. All she had was sheaves of petitions, letters and newspapers cuttings which had highlighted her plight.

I took it upon myself to see that she got her due. I began my task from the Netaji Research Bureau at Kolkata; the people there were not very cooperative. In the next six months I travelled all over the country gathering every bit of evidence that I could on the INA and the role of Lakshmi Panda in the Rani Jhansi Regiment. Surprisingly I hit pay dirt at the National Archives at New Delhi and at the INA Museum at Salimgarh Fort in Delhi. I could even get photographs of Lakshmi Panda in her uniform.

I had got information that a huge stock of documents were with a person who shall remain unnamed at Port Blair in the Andaman. I went there and got hold of details, even her gun number. The name of her compatriots, her pay details were all there. I made copies of the same.

I even got letters and affidavits from other INA veterans, including one from Lakshmi Sehgal at Kanpur. I travelled to Imphal, Kanpur, Delhi, Amritsar, Jammu, Chennai and Port Blair for gathering all the information. I used to bring back the details and when I showed them to Lakshmi Panda, she would be so excited, at times weeping of the old days. When I told her the names of her fellow fighters, she recollected so much more.

Within six months I had a six inch thick dossier, photographs, testimonials, copies of written and printed documents. All along, Lakshmi Panda was staying with me, and for the first time she got a ray of hope that she would get her due from the nation.

I wrote to the President of India, telling her of the plight of this poor lady. I wrote of Netaji and the clarion call of "Delhi Chalo" that he had

given to his fighters. The dream of unfurling the tricolour at the ramparts of the Red Fort was what had driven his army to fight in the inhospitable jungle conditions of Burma. Laxmi Panda too wanted to go to Delhi to honour the allegiance and promise that she had made to Netaji. Her “Chalo Delhi” would have been a good 63 years late, but she hoped to make this her last stand. I sent the complete dossier to the President’s Office. It took only a week for the President’s Office to acknowledge and she called me and Lakshmi Panda to Delhi.

Laxmi Panda met the President of India at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on 12th August 2008. I had the privilege of accompanying her. The frail fighter refused the offer of a wheel chair even though the carpeted corridors seemed like miles. The passage was lined with many framed paintings and photos of our national heroes, and Laxmi Panda stopped in front of all the heroes whom she recognised and gave a crisp INA salute.

The ADC to the President had told us that we

would have five minutes with her Excellency. We were ushered into the room where Smt. Pratibha Devisingh Patil received her. The five minutes passed into an hour, the President of India listened to her tale and was moved to tears. The empathy was visible. She repeatedly asked Laxmi Panda what her desire was, if she had any wants or if there was anything that the Government could do for her. “Just give me my due” was all Laxmi Panda said. The President of India offered her a purse of Rs.1/- lakh, which Laxmi Panda refused to accept. On my insistence she took a token amount of Rs.10,000/-.

The President kept her promise. Laxmi Panda was conferred the Rashtriya Swatantra Sainik Samman on the 25th of October 2008. However she did not live long enough after that. Just two weeks later she breathed her last and her only glory was that she died as a martyr.

Laxmi Panda was given a State funeral. The Nation recognised her

contribution, albeit very late. She may have died unsung, but her determination and fight, which lasted a good seventy years should be remembered by each and every son of the soil.

More than 600 soldiers in the ranks and file of the INA were Oriyas. Many of them gave up their lives in the Burma front. Most of them were from South Orissa, having gone as indentured labourers in the plantations and railways in Malaysia, Burma and Singapore. There should be a fitting memorial to these brave Oriyas. Their stories should be told.

It is time, that a fitting commemorative memorial is set up in the State. Inscribed on the pillar should be the names of all the so far identified patriots who lost their lives and liberties fighting for the motherland. This is the least that the present generation could do in memory of those brave men and women.

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