

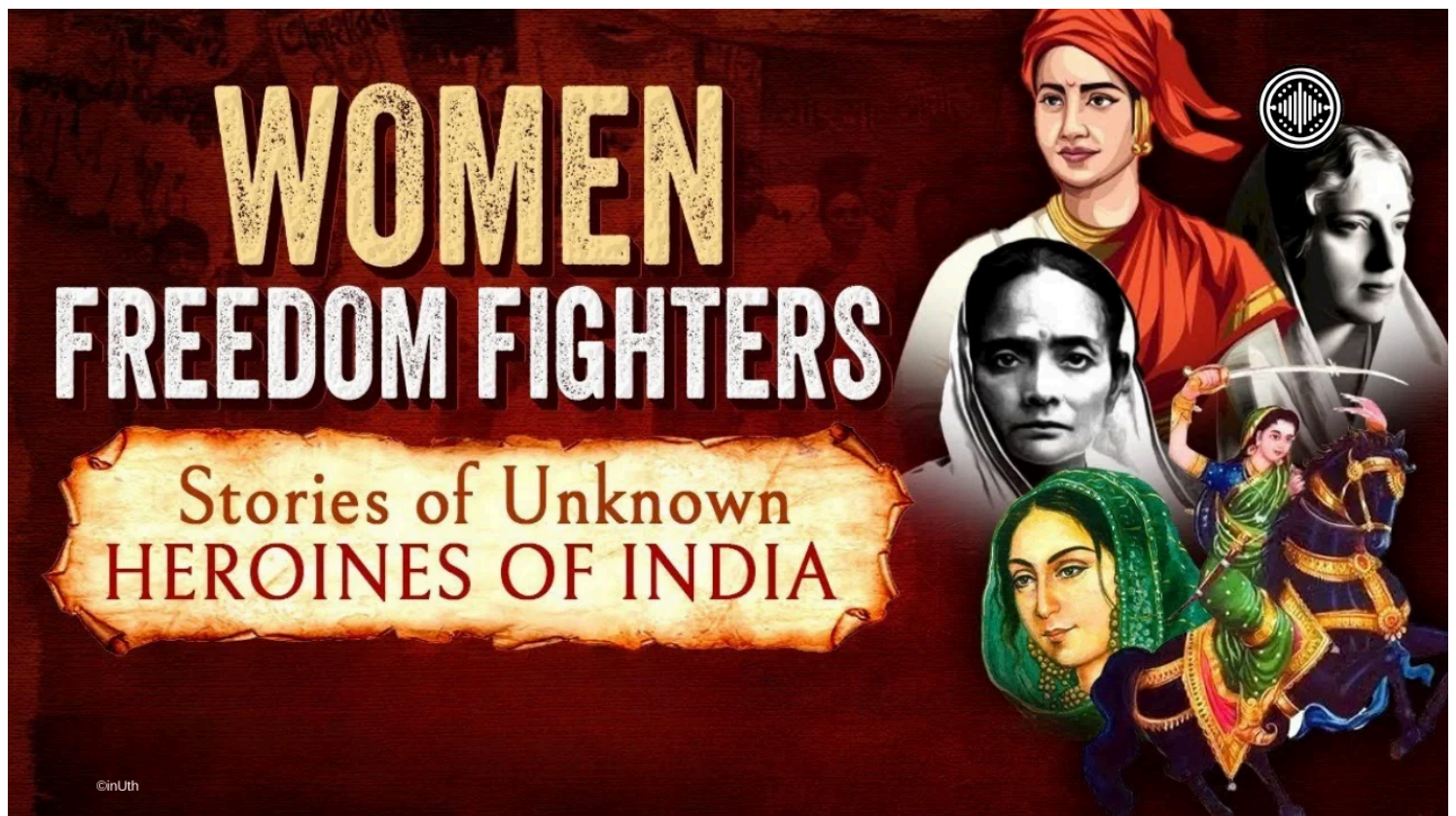
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Forgotten Women Warriors of India's Freedom

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New Delhi, India: In 1942, inside Lahore women's jail, a group of imprisoned women freedom fighters, mothers, and young girls defied colonial rule. Using scraps of cloth, they stitched a flag, stacked charpoys at dawn, and hoisted it above the prison courtyard, singing, "Hang us, we will stand at the gallows and sing songs of our homeland." Among them were Savitri Ramkishan, who was pregnant and locked up with her two small children, alongside Pushpa Gujral and Freda Houlston, an English ally.

Even as armed forces stormed in, the women remained unshaken, chanting, fasting, and flying the flag of freedom. These accounts are now featured in Hamaara Itihaas. Archives of Freedom Fighters, on display until August 23 at the India International Centre, Delhi. The exhibition uncovers overlooked contributions of women, from Lahore's jail to the all-female Jhansi Rani Regiment of the Indian National Army (INA) in Burma. It includes oral testimonies, photographs, and archival materials from India, Southeast Asia, and global cities such as London, Paris, Geneva, and San Francisco.

Curated by writer and filmmaker Sagari Chhabra, the exhibition began as a film project and evolved into a mission to document women's roles in India's independence struggle. "I set out to make a film on women freedom fighters, only to find their contributions barely documented. That realization changed my life," Chhabra said, describing her travels across India, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Myanmar to record survivors' stories.

During World War II, the Jhansi Rani Regiment, one of history's first all-female combat units, was formed in 1943 under Subhas Chandra Bose's leadership. Women from Malaya, Burma, and beyond defied tradition to fight for independence. Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan Sahgal, escaping an arranged marriage, commanded over 1,500 women warriors. She stayed behind in jungle hospitals in Myanmar to tend the wounded and survived immense hardships, including capture by both Japanese and British forces, before being repatriated to Calcutta.

After Lakshmi's transfer to Maymyo, Janaky Thevar led the regiment in Rangoon, donating her diamond earrings and riding a grey horse gifted by Bose. She marched with INA forces for 26 nights, evading enemy attacks after a Red Cross hospital bombing. Post-war, she helped establish the Malaysian Indian Congress and was awarded the Padma Shri in 2000.

Countless other women also played critical, though less documented, roles. Rama Mehta Khandwala, born in Rangoon in 1926, came from a family connected to Gandhi. At 16, she joined the INA's Rani of Jhansi Regiment alongside her sister, inspired by Bose's rallying cry "Dilli Chalo." Over 1,500 women from Malaya, Thailand, and Burma enlisted, demonstrating the deep connection between family histories of resistance and revolutionary action.

The exhibition also highlights stories from Burma, where many fighters never set foot in India yet dedicated themselves to its liberation. Perumal, a young freedom fighter from Rangoon's Kambe area, joined the INA at 18, trained at Kambe Chettiar High School, and

later supported the Azad Hind Bank, spreading awareness and collecting funds for independence.

By documenting these stories, Chhabra's exhibition preserves a vital chapter in history, showing that India's fight for freedom was shaped not only by prominent leaders but also by courageous women who risked everything.