

## Patriarchy through Patriotic Lens: A Study on the Portrayal of Women Freedom Fighters in Indian Patriotic Films

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**Abstract:** The Indian film industry or the so-called Bollywood is enriched by several regional language films like Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, and Malayalam that copiously enhances the celluloid with their uniqueness and artistic values. Taking into consideration the scenario of Bollywood, they are often seen as depicting film genres like romance, melodrama, and action thrillers that glorify and glamorize the veiled world.

Most often, these multitudes of areas, focus on gender stereotypes that are covered under the harsh veils of patriarchy. This obnoxious scenario is not much different in the case of patriotic films. The female characters are shown with less screen space and less screen time.

Compared to the dozens of films about the life and struggles of male freedom fighters, films about women freedom fighters are rare in the Indian film industry. In the case of patriotic films, only a few films are directed based on the life of women freedom fighters, which acts as contrary to the fact that women freedom fighters had an inexorable part in the history of the Indian Freedom Movement.

This paper entitled *Patriarchy through Patriotic Lens: A Study on Portrayal of Women Freedom Fighters in Indian Patriotic Films* reconnoiters how Indian women freedom fighters like Rani Lakshmi Bai, Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai, Rani Gaidinilu, Beegum Royeka, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Captain Lakshmi, Sucheta Kripalani etc who fought against the British rule are portrayed in Indian patriotic films. Compared to the dozens of films about the life and struggles of male freedom fighters, films about women freedom fighters are rare in the Indian film industry.

The paper aims to prove that there are several famous and forgotten women freedom fighters that history holds in veils. The films taken for reference here are *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *23rd March 1931: Shaheed* (2002), *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2004), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019). The study discusses the portrayal of women freedom fighters in the films and the perception of the general audience about women freedom fighters.

**Keywords:** Patriotism, Patriarchy, Bollywood, Women Freedom Fighters, History

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### INTRODUCTION

The celluloid often reflects women's image, status and role in society. Patriarchy does exist all around us, in its celebrated varied forms. Women were used as sheer props at times, or to add to the 'glamour quotient.' Such objectification can be seen as nothing but as an offshoot of the society's patriarchal outlook. Man is seen as the domineering one, as the key role player, or in other words as the Alpha one. On the

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other hand, woman is seen as the weaker sex or the marginalised who always needs a man to uplift her from their debilitated status.

Much heroic stories are spoken and written about men who fought in the Indian freedom struggle but meagre effort is taken to speak, to pen down or telecast the role of their female counterparts. The role of women freedom fighters has been forgotten and their stories are unsung. One forgets the fact that their contributions towards the motherland are impeccable. Rani Lakshmi Bai, Umabai Kundapur, Uda Devi, Jhalkari Bai, Matangini Hazra, Rani Gaidinilu, Begum Royeka, Kittur Rani Chennamma, Sarojini Naidu, Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalani etc. are some of the notable women freedom fighters. Daring, Straightforward and Fierce- these adjectives best depict the women freedom fighters of the time who dynamically participated in India's Freedom struggle.

With the dawn of Europeans in India, a struggle for independence ascended upon its citizens, and this revolt against the British unified the masses. Gandhiji's ideology, Nehru's cleverness, and the bravery of Subhash Chandra Bose were praised by the masses and encouraged the amateur minds of people. Without any fear and agony, Indian freedom fighters led their revolt. The aforementioned names are the ones that are written and etched in the golden pages of History. But why are the names of women freedom fighters seldom mentioned? Did women freedom fighters even exist? Are they recognized? Are they equally honoured like their male counterparts? The reels are a medium to depict the realities and to retain the glories of the past. There are many Indian films based on the Indian freedom movement and Indian freedom fighters. As one can see only a few films have depicted the life of women freedom fighters in the Indian film industry. The rest gave only minor recognition to the vainglorious efforts put forth by women freedom fighters. It is here that this paper takes a delve into the oft-forgotten female freedom fighters who are hardly ever mentioned in the pages of history.

This paper entitled *Patriarchy through Patriotic Lens: A Study on Portrayal of Women Freedom Fighters in Indian Patriotic Films* reconnoitres how Indian women freedom fighters are shown with less screen space and less screen time with a minimal number of dialogues. A qualitative as well as quantitative approach is employed in the paper validating the theoretical statements being made with their corresponding numerical data.

### **Theory of Patriarchy with reference to Media**

The world of Bollywood or the Hindi film industry like many other industries in the world has never moved away from patriarchy, misogyny or from abrupt domestic and marital violence towards its female counterparts. They are not celebrated as the 'She-ros', but rather they hide under the veil of the so called 'Heroes'. The silver screen hides the role played by the females even if it is a grandeur one. Such is the case taken into analysis over here. Men as well as Women have bravely and effortlessly fought for the Nation. But the reels do hide or portray these characters attributing them negligible importance. The hidden agenda behind this is to glorify the knight in armour and to forecast woman as the damsel in distress, who cannot fight for freedom or lead a group of people who aspire for freedom.

The lenses of gender and patriarchy remain critical, albeit under-theorized in the whole scenario.

## **Analysis of Patriarchy in selected Patriotic Films**

This paper entitled *Patriarchy through Patriotic Lens: A Study on Portrayal of Women Freedom Fighters in Indian Patriotic Films* focuses on five selected patriotic films and analyses each of them through a patriarchal lens. The films taken for reference here are *The Legend of Bhagat Singh* (2002), *23rd March 1931: Shaheed* (2002), *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2004), *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* (2005), *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019). Numerical validating factual evidence is also incorporated at the end of each qualitative analysis, provided in the form of a table that shows the screen space occupied and the number of dialogue deliverance attributed to each respective woman freedom fighter.

### ***The Legend of Bhagat Singh (2002)***

*The Legend of Bhagat Singh* is a 2002 biopic directed by Rajkumar Santoshi. The film starred Ajay Devgan in the titular role, along with Sushant Singh Rajput, D. Santosh and Akhilendra Mishra as the other lead characters. Indrani Banerjee portrayed the role of Durgawati Devi.

This biographical motion picture revolves around the life and times of the celebrated Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh, who led an armed resistance against the British in the 1920's. Being held behind the bars for a bombing, Singh, a native of Punjab, organizes protests along with a hunger strike against the British. This infuriates the English men, who in turn hang Bhagat Singh on March 23, 1931. He thus became the glorious 23 old martyr and a sung hero of the Indian Independence movement.

But the movie, holds an unsung heroine in veils. While lionizing the deeds of Bhagat Singh, the silver screen fails to forecast the valiant deeds of Durgawati Devi, the Indian revolutionary and a brave freedom fighter. The harsh pangs of patriarchy are very much evident in the film as the role of such a valiant and powerful woman is reduced to that of a meagre one.

Wife of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) member Bhagwati Charan Vohra, Durgawati Devi led the funeral procession of Jatindra Nath Das from Lahore to Calcutta after his death in the 63-day jail hunger strike. One of the countable women revolutionaries who actively participated in armed revolution against the ruling British Raj, Devi was contributory in assisting Bhagat Singh and Shivaram Rajguru in their escape after the killing of J. P. Saunders.

The pages of history shows that on December 17, 1928, the proclaimed revolutionaries Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru shot Assistant Superintendent of Police John Saunders, to avenge the death of Lala Lajpat Rai whom Saunders had earlier murdered in the brutal Lathi charge. The trio then sought the help of Durgawati Devi, who had known them through the Naujawan Bharat Sabha that was established with the aim of reassuring the youth to join the freedom struggle and with an objective to end the social evils of communalism and untouchability. She agreed to help the trio regardless of her own safety. She helped them financially by handing over the sum of money her late husband had left with her for emergencies. In addition to this, in order to help Bhagat Singh escape from the British intelligence in Lahore, she also took up the challenging role to pose as Singh's wife.

The brave deeds of Durgawati Devi never ceases. When her husband Jatindra Nath Das, had died in the 63 day jail hunger strike it was she who valiantly lead the funeral from Lahore to Calcutta. After Bhagat Singh yielded himself for the 1929 Assembly bomb-throwing incident, Devi courageously tried to assassinate Lord Hailey. Though the attempt was in vein, many of his associates perished in the incident. This led to her imprisonment for three years. Durga Devi's act of sacrifice and courage stands par excellence in the fact that the social dogmas of the time strictly forbade contact between men and women who were not married. Despite acknowledging the risks, she decided to help the revolutionaries, knowing how important their leadership was for the nationalist struggle toward India's Independence along with carrying out her own measures for freedom from the colonisers.

In contrast to the rest of the freedom fighters, after Indian Independence, Durga started living as a common citizen in quiet secrecy and exclusion in Ghaziabad. Devi also paved way for opening a school in Lucknow for under privileged children.

But all these elements are missing in the film, as Bhagat Singh is shown as a knight in shining armour and the role of Durgawati Devi is very much minimalised with shorter screen duration and minimal dialogues, stumbled under the lens of patriarchy. Let us look into the data analysis provided below to validate this point.

Name of the Film	<i>The Legend of Bhagat Singh</i>
Duration of the Film	155 Minutes
Woman Freedom Fighter involved	Durgawati Devi
Total Number of Scenes in Film	111
Number of Scenes Related to the aforementioned Woman Freedom Fighter	3
Number of Scenes with Dialogue	3

*Table 1. Film Details. The Legend of Bhagat Singh*

As can be noted from the above table, the biopic consists of a total number of 111 scenes with a run time of 155 Minutes. But Durgawati Devi, who had played a pivotal role in the freedom struggle of India is shown as a minor character who appears in just 3 scenes with similar number of dialogues.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> March 1931: Shaheed (2002)**

*23rd March 1931: Shaheed* is yet another film based on the life of Bhagat Singh and Chandrashekhar Azad starring Bobby Deol as Bhagat Singh and Sunny Deol as Chandrashekhar Azad respectively. Directed by Guddu Dhanoa, the film consists of 105 scenes in total.

Durgawati Devi was crucial in protecting Bhagat Singh when the Britishers had produced a lookout notice for him associated with the murder of John Saunders. She was also a key member of Chandrasekhar Azad and Bhagat Singh's Hindustan Socialist Republican Army. But the patriarchal lens gave her only a feeble screen space negotiating all her sacrifices and leaderships.

Name of the Film	23 <sup>rd</sup> March 1931: Shaheed
Duration of the Film	185 Minutes
Women Freedom Fighter involved	Durgawati Devi
Total Number of Scenes in the Film	105
Number of Scenes Related to Women Freedom Fighter	9
Number of Scenes with Dialogue	3

Table 2. Film Details. 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1931: Shaheed

As can be validated, the Indian woman freedom fighter Durgawati Devi is here portrayed in a countable 9 scenes with just 3 scenes with dialogues. Divya Dutta portrayed the role of Durgawati Devi in the film and again the pangs of patriarchy is visible here as the role of such an eminent freedom fighter is minimalised.

### ***Mangal Pandey: The Rising (2005)***

*Mangal Pandey: The Rising* is a 2005 Bollywood movie based on the life of Mangal Pandey, the Indian soldier who started the first Indian rebellion of 1857 against the British. The film was directed by Ketan Mehta and Aamir Khan portrayed the character, Mangal Pandey.

The movie is an epic tale of friendship, betrayal, love and sacrifice and is set against the backdrop of the First War of Independence, which the Britisher's fondly addressed as the Sepoy Mutiny. Pandey's valorous deeds are exemplified in the movie with grandeur chivalry. Mangal Pandey was killed by the British and from the death of Mangal Pandey the Revolt of 1857 started. His heroic deeds are very well depicted in the film. On the other hand, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Pandey's contemporary also fought against the British in the Revolt of 1857 to save her kingdom of Jhansi. But she only appears as a cameo in the film.

So who was Rani Lakshmi Bai and why is she missing from the major scenes of the film? Rani Lakshmi Bai aka Manikarnika was born in 1828 as Manikarnika Tambe, and her life exemplifies the quintessential revolt against the patriarchy. When she entered the age of adolescence, she was trained to be a warrior, mastering in the art of archery, horse-riding, and sword wielding. These activities were considered non-feminine and were forbidden for a young woman at that time. Apart from this, she also trained her fellow women to follow her path and become great warriors. Her bravery was illustrated at the time when her despicable fate led her to rise to power at a time when the British, under the Doctrine of Lapse deemed her adopted son as an ill-suited heir to the throne after the demise of the King, demanding the Rani to surrender as the British annexed Jhansi. Lakshmi Bai, who was only twenty-two years of age then, stood her ground as she opposed the demands of the British. After veinless efforts of compromise with the British, she joined the first Indian rebellion against the British becoming the leader of the rebellion itself, leading an entire army of men and women in mutiny against colonial rule.

She was quite famous for her unique perspectives and her courage to fight against social norms even in front of the whole society. As per the Doctrine of Lapse there was no son of King Gangadhar Rao. Hence, Damodar Rao was adopted by them and Rani Lakshmi Bai fought against them. Lakshmi Bai fought as an intrepid and fearless soldier until her premature death in the 1858 battle. She juxtaposed many of the patriarchal cultural prospects for women in India's society at that time. But all

these scenes are missing in the patriarchy dominated film. It clearly illustrates that apart from having their names registered in British records, most patriotic women remain unknown.

The movie *Mangal Pandey: The Rising* shows the female heroic tradition of India, which has been stripped due to the patriarchal mindset and historiography. The missing Jhansi in the film supports this statement. Let us look into the statistical data to validate the point.

Name of the Film	<i>Mangal Pandey: The Rising</i>
Duration of the Film	151 Minutes
Women Freedom Fighter involved	Rani Lakshmi Bai
Total Number of Scenes in the Film	65
Number of Scenes Related to the Woman Freedom Fighter	1
Number of Scenes with Dialogue	1

*Table 3. Film Details. Mangal Pandey: The Rising*

As evident from the table, the film consists of a total of 65 scenes and the woman freedom fighter Rani Lakshmi Bai was portrayed in just 1 scene in the film. The character was portrayed by Varsha Usgaonkar and she had only a single dialogue in the entire film.

### ***Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero (2004)***

*Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero* (2004) is based on the life of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose written and directed by Shyam Benegal. Sachin Khedekar played the character of Subhas Chandra Bose in the film. The film focuses on the last five years of Netaji's life and how he formed the Azad Hind Fauj. It also includes his life story that is narrated in flashback sequences followed in a non-chronological order. While all these leaderships taken by him are vividly mentioned in the film, it fails to bring out the story of his close associate and fellow freedom fighter Captain Lakshmi Sehgal.

Captain Lakshmi Sehgal was a woman who played magnificent roles and held various positions hand in hand. She picked up a Gun for Indian National Army (INA) founded by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and led it like a tigress in India's struggle for freedom. She led the Rani of Jhansi Regiment from the front, leading a group of women soldiers. Apart from being a freedom fighter she was also an avid fighter against casteism. By profession, she was an accomplished medical student but this never stopped her inclination toward the freedom struggle.

As a young doctor of 26, she boarded the plane to Singapore. There she met Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. It was a meeting that changed her life for the better. Lakshmi Sehgal states, "In Singapore, there were a lot of nationalist Indians like K. P. Kesava Menon, S. C. Guha, N. Raghavan, and others, who formed a Council of Action. The Japanese, however, would not give any firm commitment to the Indian National Army, nor would they say how the movement was to be expanded, how they would go into Burma, or how the fighting would take place. People naturally got fed up." (Menon)

One of the founding members of AIDWA formed in 1981, Sahgal actively guided plentiful of its activities and campaigns. The Captain led a medical team to the city, after the Bhopal gas tragedy in December 1984. She also penned a medical report on the long-term effects of the gas on pregnant women. In the meantime, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 aroused Sikh hatred among the masses. To put out the caste hatred in the streets of Kanpur, she made sure that no Sikh or Sikh establishment in the crowded area near her clinic was attacked. Thus she ensured communal harmony at any cost.

Considering Sehgal's life, it can be seen as a knotty part of 20th and early 21st century India as it aptly dealt with the struggle against colonial rule, the accomplishment of freedom, and the building of the nation over 65 riotous years. This magnificent historical transition, positioned herself firmly on the side of the needy and the underprivileged.

A Freedom fighter to its true spirits, an enthusiastic and impartial medical practitioner, and an owing leader of the women's movement in India, Captain Lakshmi leaves the country and its people a fine and enduring legacy, to which every Indian is forever indebted to. Hence the film, *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero (2004)*, has done great injustice to the woman freedom fighter by not portraying any of her brave and kind renderings.

Name of the Film	<i>Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero</i>
Duration of the Film	208 Minutes
Women Freedom Fighter involved	Captain Lakshmi Sehgal
Total Number of Scenes in Film	142
Number of Scenes Related to the Woman Freedom Fighter	7
Number of Scenes with Dialogue	5

Table 4. Film Details. *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: The Forgotten Hero*

The film consists of a total number of 142 scenes and the woman freedom fighter Captain Lakshmi Sehgal, despite being Bose's close associate was portrayed in just 7 scenes. The role of Lakshmi was played by Rajeshwari Sachdev and the scenes with dialogues attributed to a meagre number of 5 scenes. The screwed mindset of the Indian patriarchy that fails to accept a woman leader and freedom fighter is very much evident here on the silver screen.

### **Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi (2019)**

*Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* is based on the life of Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi and her resistance against the British in the Indian Rebellion of 1857. The film directed by Radha Krishna Jagarlamundi had Kangana Ranaut play the character of Rani Lakshmi Bai. The pivotal point to be noted here is that Rani Lakshmi Bai was the first ever Indian woman to fight against the British in the wake of Independence.

The times when most of the Rajas and Princes were assisting the pseudo horse by consciously obeying the commands of the East India Company, the patriotic rebel in Lakshmi Bai refused to kneel down. She assembled a wave against British Raj by rallying the citizens including the female warriors. It was a time when the strength of the limbs was as important as mental sharpness. To be a woman amidst conflicting

circumstances, she did what is beyond the ambit of many. *Manikarnika* boldly highlights this sentiment.

The viewer is tolerant with the fact that Rani Lakshmbai was a prolific reader with strong command over the English language. She comes in an aura of confidence and confronts the British with a straight face. Her character and talent are par excellence as she breaks away from the social stigma attached with a widowed woman at the time. Rather, she takes it to heart to fight against the Britishers, acting as a Real Queen, becoming the Queen of Jhansi. It underscores Lakshmi Bai's ingenious political strategies, her ambition to feel the passion of the masses. She is shown as a happy-go-lucky lass who enjoys riding the horse, and engaging in archery and swordsmanship, which were considered taboo for women at the time. The closure portrays a brave Lakshmi Bai embracing death with a serene satisfied smile, having given her best in the last battle.

Now, let us look at the statistical data, showing how much screen importance is given to the character of Rani Lakshmi Bai.

Name of the Film	<i>Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi</i>
Duration of the Film	148 Minutes
Women Freedom Fighter Involved	Rani Lakshmi Bai
Total Number of Scenes in Film	78
Number of Scenes Related to the Women Freedom Fighter	53
Number of Scenes with Dialogue	45

*Table 5. Film Details. Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*

The film consisted of a total number of 78 scenes wherein only 53 scenes are related to Lakshmi Bai, the lead character in the film, unlike other patriotic films that had full screen space occupied by its male counterparts.

From the analysis and findings, it is clear that there are several famous and forgotten women freedom fighters in our history. Rani Lakshmi Bai, Uda Devi, Jhalkari bai, Rani Gaidinilu, Beegum Royeka, Sarojini Naidu, Aruna Asaf Ali, Captain Lakshmi, Sucheta Kripalani were the notable women who fought against the British Rule. In the case of patriotic films, only a few films were directed based on the life of women freedom fighters.

## CONCLUSION

While the patriarchal mindset would like to believe that women were just helpers, in sheer reality they were crusaders and carried out crucial errands during the freedom movement. At a period in history when orthodoxy and patriarchy were at their epitome, these courageous women took it upon themselves to proactively and solemnly put up a brave fight against the harsh white rule of the Colonisers. When most of the men were comprehensively put in prison, it was the marginalized womenfolk who effortlessly came to the forefront and took charge of the freedom struggle. In spite of the agony, manipulation and adversities they faced, they came forward with true spirit and courage to give the country the much cherished and awaited dream of independence from the British. The patriarchal society might continue to force its pangs on the woman community, but the tales of these crusaders



shall always be cherished in the mind of every patriotic Indian and hopefully the celluloid will be able to preserve those moments in its true spirit.

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