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When Women Warriors Become Heroines: the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in WW II

In January of this year Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced the military would lift its 1994 ban on women in combat and open front-line jobs to women. Immediately after Panetta's announcement, those opposing the idea aired their grievances. Among the arguments against deployment of women in combat were questions about women's physical and psychological fitness for battle, fear that male soldiers would be obsessed with protecting female soldiers, and doubts that men and women could form an effective fighting unit. The debate about women in the Indian military includes similar objections to their suitability for combat and as commissioned officers.

At the same time, India's women warriors -- especially the heroine of "India's First War of Independence" of 1857, the Rani of Jhansi, and the "Ranis" of Subhas Chandra Bose's Rani of Jhansi Regiment who tried to liberate India in 1943 -- are celebrated in history books, statues, films, plays, comics, and the names of schools and parks. The prominent recognition of women warriors as nationalist heroines sits uneasily with statements by high-ranking officers that India does not need women in the military.

In this presentation, I will discuss the history of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in World War II and attempt to explain why their status as nationalist heroines has so little impact on the discussion of women's role in the Indian armed forces.