

**Revisiting the Role of Darjeeling Soldiers in INA through the lens
of Krishna Bahadur Sunwar's Life and Legacy**

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Abstract: *The formation of the Indian National Army marked a watershed in India's struggle for independence. Contrary to the popular belief that Darjeeling soldiers always fought alongside the British to suppress the National Movement in India, a considerable proportion of them sacrificed their lives for the Nation in the Azad Hind Fauz. Considering Darjeeling's history, which is a reconstruction of the British imagination where the history and identity of the natives have been largely subdued, it becomes imperative to reconsider the role played by the natives in colonial India. Biography may assume a significant role in this context for recovering these lost histories. This paper will try to analyze the role played by Krishna Bahadur Sunwar in the Indian National Army and how he represents hundreds of other Hill Soldiers who joined the Indian National Army to fight for the Nation. In a secluded place like Darjeeling, with little to no documentation on mass struggles during the freedom struggle, biographies of such figures help illuminate the much-neglected community. This biography hopes to bring to life the history of the contribution of this marginal society to India.*

Keywords: *Azad Hind Fauz , British ,Colonial, Darjeeling, Struggle, Soldiers etc.*

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Introduction

The Indian National Army was a brave attempt by Netaji to restore power to the Indians by force. It was initially formed outside the soil of India by the former Captain Mohan Singh, a British Indian Army officer. He formed a loose coalition with the Japanese to enlist the Indians who were Japanese Prisoners of War to fight the British in India. However, this coalition did not work as problems arose over who was to lead the army, the Indians or the Japanese.¹ A young and enthusiastic man, Subash Chandra Bose, who had already made a

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name for himself in Indian politics, saw potential in the turmoil that the entire world was going through during World War II. He took the initiative to carry forward the plan woven by Captain Mohan Singh. He decided to build the Indian National Army from 1943 onwards. He took charge on 25th August 1943 as Supreme Commander of Azad Hind Fauz (Indian National Army). His own words on this day have been recorded: "In the interest of the Indian Independence Movement and the Azad Hind Fauz, I have taken over the direct command of our army from this day."² Bose was able to garner forces from amongst several Indian patriots who had been banished in Southeast Asia and the Japanese Prisoners of war. They flocked swiftly to join the Indian National Army as its immediate goal was the freedom of their beloved nation.

Methodology

The present study employs a historical analytical approach grounded in a biographical framework. In writing the life of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, a soldier from a marginal community, I have tried to draw upon a variety of sources. Oral history was adopted through an interview with his son, offering personal memory and familial perspectives that are otherwise missing in official records. Archival corpus like government files, certificates, etc, proved to be a crucial form of historical methodology in the study. In addition, a field visit was made to a memorial, and an interaction was made with the people of the community to understand how far the subject was remembered/forgotten in their memories. These were supplemented by the secondary sources. Hence, by weaving together the various methods, the study adopts an orientation of a biographical turn and microhistory, which situates the life and legacy of an individual within broader narratives of marginality, community identity, and nationalist struggle.

Reflections on the early life of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar

The early life of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, as narrated by his youngest son Pawan Sunuwar, started in a small tea garden, '*Kambal Kaman*' also known as Bannockburn Tea estate, located below Takdah, Darjeeling. Like hundreds of other families in Darjeeling, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar belonged to a family of Tea Garden workers. His father was a Sardar in Glenburn Tea Garden, whose main job was employing Tea Garden labourers. Krishna Bahadur was born on 21.02.1921, a time when the Gandhian Nationalism and Freedom struggle was rapidly gaining pace. His father was Rabilal Sunuwar. Krishna Bahadur had

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three brothers and four sisters. His mother was Savitri Sunuwar, who later became widowed. After the untimely death of Rabilal Sunuwar, the family decided to move to Gopaldhara Tea Estate in present-day Mirik, where one of the Sunuwar daughters was married.³

Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar spent his early years in Gopal Dhara Tea Estate. Reflecting on the significance of this region, Gopal Dhara had already given birth to another notable freedom fighter, Narbir Lama, who had started spreading ideals of freedom among the youth. Gopal Dhara also witnessed a small informal education system started by a local Sahabir Subba around the year 1934, which was forcefully shut down by the then British Planter in fear of the locals' aggression against the British⁴. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar was raised in this environment, which might have played a significant role in his life. As a young boy, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar did not have an interest in school and books. He was a free spirit, more interested in the newly introduced cars and their machinations. He was enthusiastic about driving cars, which eventually led him to leave Gopal Dhara and move to Darjeeling. Due to his modest background and lack of formal education, he had to earn his livelihood through various low-paying jobs. He went to Darjeeling, struggling to find a decent position. His passion for automobiles finally proved beneficial, and he started work as a driver from the busy Darjeeling stand.⁵

He worked as a driver in Darjeeling when he was a young teenager, 17 or 18. During World War II, his son recounts an occurrence that ultimately prompted him to enlist in the Indian Army. When the Second World War was just getting started, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar came to Darjeeling. To combat the Axis Powers, the British had begun enlisting soldiers from all around India. By coincidence, one day, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar was traveling to Jalpahar by his normal route. He was involved in a collision with a British Colonel's vehicle while traveling. The enraged Colonel exited his vehicle and ripped Sunuwar's driver's license. He could hardly compete with the powerful British Colonel; he was only a driver. He lost his source of income that fateful day. It would not suit him to return to Gopal Dhara as a man without work. Hence, he began searching for other options. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar would come across the recruitment ground of Jalapahar, where many young men like him were being selected to fight in the British Indian Army during the Second World War. This proved as a fruitful alternative to an unemployed Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar. He went to the Ghoom Gorkha recruiting Depot, and after qualifying for the Army Physical Fitness Test in the Jalpahar Ground, he became a recruit in the British Indian Army.⁶ It has been recorded that he joined the military service on 12.03.1941.⁷ Krishna Bahadur

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Sunuwar was not the only youth who was recruited in Jalpahar. Darjeeling was filled with young men such as him who were looking for an opportunity to make a living. Other notable young men who joined the Army with Sunuwar and later joined Netaji's INA were Digbir Singh Ramudamu from Ghoom and Bhagirath Chettri from Darjeeling. They were all sent to Jabalpur for training. His recruitment process throws light on the fact that the Gorkha Soldiers were not only from Nepal. Darjeeling, a part of the British Indian Empire, was also an important recruiting base.

Towards War

His life in the military started in Jabalpur. The oral narratives among the people of Gopaldhara suggest that many young men from Darjeeling had been sent to Jabalpur along with him. Bhagirath Chettri, Digbir Singh Ramudamu, to name a few, who later joined the INA and fought for the nation.⁸ He had to undergo some rigorous training there for six months. He received six months of military and technical training at Jabalpur.⁹ An article titled '*Netaji's Bodyguard in Burma Jungle passes away*' by Amitava Banerjee was printed in the Hindustan Times on 13th September 2012. The article mentions that Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar was recruited by the British as they were 'awestruck by his boxing skills.' The young men of Darjeeling, to a great extent, were recruited for their agility, swiftness, and strength. After completing the Indian Army Ordinance core training, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar was sent along with his unit to Southeast Asia in November 1941. He was posted at a workshop unit, which left for Singapore in January 1942.¹⁰ It was here, in Singapore, that the Allied forces, also comprising Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar's unit, surrendered to the Japanese forces. They were captured by the Japanese as Prisoners of War. A letter posted to his mother, Smt. Savitri Sunuwarni testifies to this. The letter reads "The officer I/C I.A.O.C regards very much regrets to inform you that your son Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, Unit 44, 2nd of W/S Coy, is believed to be a prisoner of war since 15.02.42....." This event marked an important landmark in the history of many Darjeeling soldiers as it was here that they heard the fiery speech of Netaji for the first time, which inspired them to fight for the nation. Mr. Suraj Sharma reminisces about the story told to him by Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar in his article *Azad Hind Fauz ka senani Krishna Bahadur*. "Only after hearing the speech of Netaji did my eyes open towards the larger, greater goal which was to fight for our nation and its citizens"¹¹. He was among the earliest members to enlist in the Azad Hind Fauz. It is recorded that Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, under the influence of Captain Mohan Singh, joined the INA

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as a sepoy in a workshop unit.¹² Thus, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar's journey commenced as an INA soldier.

His role in the INA

The official records claim that he worked in a workshop unit in the INA as a sepoy fitter, which must be due to his prior work as a driver. However, during the war fought by the INA, he was far more than a sepoy fitter. The charisma of Netaji seems to have had a huge impact on Krishna Bahadur. He is recorded as saying, "Materialistic happiness is important, but not everything. Values are more long-lasting and give greater happiness. Walk on the path that Netaji showed, and nothing can go wrong."¹³ His absolute faith in Netaji was also found among other soldiers from Darjeeling. Digbir Singh Ramudamu, another sepoy from Darjeeling, carried on in the battle of Burma even when he was shot and badly wounded.¹⁴ He moved forward with Netaji's words reverberating, 'give me blood and I will give you freedom'. We may glance into whether all Gorkha soldiers (from Nepal and India) who had been captured by the Japanese as Prisoners of War joined the INA. As already stated, the word Gurkha has been used by the British to define all soldiers from Nepali Nepali-speaking background, irrespective of their origin. With the word of the British being the final verdict, no one would claim otherwise. Byron Farwell, in 'The Gurkhas, 1984, has denied the participation of any Gurkha in the INA. He states, "Many Indians did succumb and join the INA, but no Gurkha joined. In fact, in the entire course of war, although some 20,000 Indians changed sides, only one Gurkha, Durga Singh Lama, a former line boy, born in India, did so. Later, he was captured by the British and brought to Delhi, and hanged to death after a short trial. The Gurkha prisoners were treated brutally, put in solitary confinement without food and badly beaten, still no one joined the INA".¹⁵ This is one of the many occasions that showcase the unreliability of British sources. The name that he mentions here is Durga Singh Lama, who was the only Gorkha from India to join the INA. The name was Durga Malla, whose statue stands today in the Parliament building. This casual mistake that he makes with the name throws light on the fact that his statement cannot be relied on. However, such writings have led to the distortion of the past. Moreover, the Azad Hind Fauz divisions were not made based on a particular region, like the British division of the army. The various divisions were named after the freedom fighters of India. This can also prove challenging in locating the soldiers from Darjeeling who fought for the INA. Numerous works are written on the bravery of the Gorkha Soldiers who fought for the British. But the contribution of

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Gorkha soldiers from India who fought against the British is rare. Writing biographies of these soldiers, many of whom sacrificed their lives for the nation, might be the first step towards rewriting the history of Indian soldiers. Hence, recording the role of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar in the INA might play a role in reclaiming the historical narrative of the participation of Gorkhas in the INA.

Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar's role in the INA has only started to surface in research circles recently. Short articles here and there were written, but major work on his life and role in INA only began when the Gopaldhara Shalik Nirman Committee, started by Mr. Kabir Basnet, a resident of Gopaldhara, decided to construct a statue of him, which was completed in 2023. This committee reached out to friends and families who knew Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar during his lifetime and collected stories and snippets of his life, which have been published in a magazine, Smarika- Swatantrata Senani Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar Mukhia. This magazine, although not a biography, has proved helpful in writing the same. The stories he told about his days in the jungles of Burma with Netaji and the enthusiasm they felt have been shared in the Smarika. After he joined the INA, the *fauz* soon left for Burma. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar was employed as a driver of Netaji.¹⁶ Owing to his driving skills in the hills, his role might have proved beneficial to Netaji in the rough terrains of the Burma jungle. Later, many years after Independence, when he was called on a stage to say a few words, he said with teary eyes how he would sometimes imagine Netaji would come sit in his car and he would drive him around. He never believed in the death of Netaji and argued against this till his death. His days in the jungles of Burma were filled with enthusiasm and passion for the Independence of the country. He recalls them as his most cherished days. "We are the ones who turned days into nights and nights into days in the jungles of Burma, fighting alongside Netaji. We used to sleep all day in the jungles and attack the British at night. The British used to light up the jungle with flares and open fire with machine guns. We charged them with bayonets and Khukuris. Dilli chalo was the slogan that wrung fear into the hearts of the goras."¹⁷ INA won some historic battles in the jungles of Burma and posed as a serious threat to the British. They moved forward with a zeal and hope that have been depicted in numerous movies and books. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, along with many others from the remote parts of India, was a part of this historic moment. A survey report on the activities of INA dated 17th April, 1943, discusses the Gorkha Soldiers of INA who formed one of the fifth column parties who left for India from Rangoon at the end of August 1942 with instructions to collaborate with Congress workers and help them in destroying

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communications, dumps, etc. It is also noted here that none of these Gorkhas came from Nepal. Two were from Dharmashala and one was from Darjeeling.¹⁸ Similarly, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar also recalls his days when he used to gather intelligence, comb areas that he would visit, and fight on the front lines.¹⁹ K.K. Muktan also records various incidents where Gorkhas from different parts of India worked as efficient secret agents to the INA, creating a well-knit espionage. This report alone is sufficient to understand that there was more than one Gorkha who had joined the INA.

While fighting the British in the jungles of Burma, Krishna Bahadur was shot. He was badly wounded and had to be hospitalised. Craving to deliver freedom to his countrymen and eager to walk on the path of Netaji, Krishna Bahadur could not keep away from the battlefield for long. He soon joined his unit and resumed the fight for independence against the British. Subash Chandra Bose awarded him the Satrunash Medal.²⁰ Unfortunately, when the Japanese force started hesitating to assist the INA in Rangoon, the allied forces took advantage and overpowered the INA. Many INA soldiers were captured, along with Krishna Bahadur. The records mention that he was captured by the British in January 1944 and sent to imprisonment in Jessore (present-day Bangladesh) for participating in the freedom movement.²¹ He was tried and classified 'Black' (INA soldiers who were leading the mutiny and had to undergo trial were classified Black). During his trial, Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, along with the other soldiers of the INA, refused to give a formal apology to the British Government. Hence, they were dismissed from their duty in the Army. A handwriting of Krishna Bahadur has been recorded, which was signed on 24.10.1945 in the presence of KC Bose, Inspector of Police, IB Branch, Bengal. Although illegible, he clearly begins his note with a Jay Hind and goes on to say that he plans to wait for further orders from Netaji....²² His journey as a Soldier ended here. After the fall of the INA, Krishna Bahadur was released, and he returned to his home in Gopal Dhara. His brief yet impactful journey in INA has broken many myths and proved to give a solid base for further research.

Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar returned to Gopadhara in 1946 after the fall of the INA. He had been dismissed from the British Army payroll. He resumed his work as a driver in various areas of Darjeeling. Later, in 1957, he was appointed as a driver in the Darjeeling District School board, where he would work for 27 years till his retirement. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar received a Tamra Patra in the year 1972 for his outstanding role in the INA. The All-India INA Committee furnished him with a certificate on 1st December 1987, claiming that he was a member of the Indian National Army and that he is entitled to all concessions allowed

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to other political sufferers.²³ He continued receiving a pension from the Darjeeling District School board and allowances for his sacrifice in the freedom movement. He also received a Sambardhana Patra (Letter of appreciation) on 15th August 2011 from the hands of the District Head, Mohan Gandhi, in Darjeeling. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar lived in Rockville, Darjeeling, with his family till his death. He died on 11th September 2011, of old age. He was 91. He is survived by three sons, Suresh Sunuwar, Pawan Sunuwar, and Kamal Sunuwar, two daughters, Meera and Kalpana, and grandchildren.²⁴

Significance of his biography

Biographical methodology has only gained wider acceptance in the last decades of the twentieth century. Before this, biographies were not regarded as a distinctive framework of historical interpretation. In recent times, Biography, as a critical methodology in the humanities, has been gaining more popularity. Historian Joseph Miller, in his book 'A Historical Appreciation of the Biographical Turn,' addressed the issue of the significance of biography as an accepted method in writing history. According to him, movements, cultures, and ideas do not move on their own; it is the people/individuals who make decisions, adapt, and change them.²⁵ Thus, a biography may help in gaining factual knowledge and thus contribute to evaluating and also reshaping the established narratives of the past.

This short biography of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar challenges the narrative of the Gorkha Soldiers from Darjeeling and their non-participation in the INA. It brings a fresh perspective to strong opinions held by some British authors like Peter Harclerode, David Reynolds, Arthur Campbell, etc, who deny or give largely diminished figures of Gurkha participation in the INA.²⁶ While discussing the role of marginal communities in a National Movement, it becomes imperative to begin from the biographies of individuals to get a broader framework of the study. In this case, the biography of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar, a simple driver from Darjeeling who went on to become a soldier in the INA and fought alongside Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, is significant in understanding the response of the hill soldiers of Darjeeling to the call of freedom. Contrary to the common belief that Gorkha soldiers have always remained loyal to the British Empire, this biography reveals another facet of the narrative. It also reflects how all Gurkha soldiers were necessarily recruited from Nepal. Thus, the common term 'Gurkha' used to define all the soldiers from India and Nepal

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may lead to individual stories being suppressed. Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar's biography can serve as a point of reference for re-imagining the role of Darjeeling Soldiers in the INA.

Conclusion

Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar remains a key figure in reconnecting the remote hills of Darjeeling with the larger movements of the Nation. The dedication and passion of every individual in Burma, Malaya, Singapore, Kohima, etc, made the dreams of independent India successful. Efforts should be made to acknowledge the contributions of every soldier, without which the study of the Freedom struggle cannot be deemed complete. Biography might play an important role in recognising this goal. To record any historical event, it is necessary to explain the actions taken by humans. Assessing these human behaviours leads to evaluating the beliefs, opinions, and aspirations of individuals, which culminate in larger movements. Analysing the life and legacy of Krishna Bahadur Sunuwar helps in realising the action taken by the soldiers of Darjeeling in the Indian National Army.

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