

The Struggle of Indian National Army: Course and Legacies

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to analysis the historical background of the formation of Indian National Army (INA) under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, its fight for India's freedom and the extraordinary legacies it left behind. In January 1941, Bose left home in disguise and reached to Nazi Germany where with the help of the German government he formed the Freise Indian Legion "a sister organisation of INA". But later on, because of the war situation he left Germany and reached Singapore. He took the leadership of the already formed INA there as the Supreme Commander and injected a new life in it. INA fought valiantly in the battle but was ultimately defeated, leaving behind the significant legacies of national symbols, the examples of communal harmony and secularism, the spirit of fighting for the Indians against British subjugation and also the contributions of several leading INA members as politicians and high officers in independent India. The findings indicate that the INA shook the loyalty of the Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army to the British Crown which compelled the Britishers to expedite the liberation of India and it was even acknowledged by then British Prime Minister Clement Attlee.*

Keywords: *British, Communal Harmony, Jai Hind, Legacies, Second World War etc.*

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Introduction

The Second World War broke out in September 1939 and Subhas Chandra Bose, after being isolated by the Congress high command for his militant ideas, was arrested by the British Government under the 'defence of India' laws on 2 July 1940. Knowing that the Government

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was determined to hold him in the prison, on 29 November 1940, he announced that he would starve himself to death and after his refusal to the forcible feeding he was released and allowed to go home. But he was not in bell and the Government made that clear that as soon as his health improved, he would be rearrested.¹

Bose escaped from his Elgen road house on 17 January 1941 and arrived at Peshawar through Delhi. By the afternoon of 26 January, he had crossed the territorial limits of Britain's Indian empire and reached Kabul late in the morning of January 31.² In February 1941 Bose asked the German Embassy in Kabul for help to go to Europe. Italian Government was more prone to help Bose pass through Moscow to Europe. For that they sent to their Kabul Embassy a special courier named Orlando Mazzotta from Rome whose passport later on used by Bose by replacing the photograph of Mazzotta by his own. Bose left Kabul on 18 March and arrived to Moscow by train and from there left by air and finally reached Berlin on 3 April, 1941.³

In Berlin after several months of waiting and negotiation, the German government finally agreed to help Bose in his struggle for India's independence. At first, he was allowed to form the Azad Hind Sangh which was also known as Free India Centre or Zentrale Freies Indien (ZFI) in Berlin on 2 November 1941. It was during that time that a huge number of Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army were surrendered to the German and Italian forces in the battlefield of Egypt and Libya. Those prisoners of war soldiers were eager to join the ranks of the Free India's armed force under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose for the liberation of their motherland. On 26 January 1942 on the Indian Independence Day the Free India Army was formed with its camp at Hamburg. It was called the Freise Indian Legion. For the initial stage Netaji asked for 400 volunteers for the Legion but received 4000 soldiers instead. The Legion consisted different units like parachutists, infantry, cavalry, mechanised corps etc.⁴ The goal of the Indian Legion was that when the invasion of India by land from Germany via Iran was possible, the Legion soldiers would fight the British inside India.⁵

Japan entered the Second World War on 7 December 1941 and on 15 February 1942, the rapidly advancing Japanese troops occupied the impregnable British fortress of Singapore. Lieutenant General Arthur Percival of the British Indian Army surrendered to the Japanese Army and handed over eighty thousand soldiers, including forty-five or fifty thousand Indians and it was from those prisoners of war the Indian National Army (INA) formed in Southeast Asia for the first time under the leadership of Captain Mohan Singh. But later on, Singh realized that the Japanese did not have the intention of creating a larger and

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robust INA but just to use it for their own benefit and that India's next occupier might be Japan, he finally rebelled. In December 1942 he was arrested by the Japanese military administration.⁶

Meanwhile in Germany, Bose had a meeting with the Führer Adolf Hitler on 27 May 1942 where Hitler declined Bose's proposal of an official German policy statement supporting India's right to freedom and advised him to go to Japan. The Führer arranged a submarine for Bose's travel back to Asia because moving by air would be too dangerous and Bose agreed to that plan. On 9 February 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose and his Comrade-in-Arms Abid Hasan Safrani boarded to the German submarine U-180 in Kiel, Germany and left for their Southeast Asian destination. On 28 April they were transfer to the Japanese submarine I-29 and on 6 May they reached Sabang Island naval base of the northern tip of Sumatra. From Sumatra, Bose was transported to Tokyo in a Japanese combat aircraft. On 10 June Bose met Tojo and received his permission to travel to Singapore and take the charge of INA as the Supreme Commander.⁷

Subhas Chandra Bose reached Singapore on 2 July 1943 and on 4 July Rash Behari Bose, the veteran Indian freedom fighter who was active in Japan, handed over the leadership of both the Indian Independence League (IIL) and the INA to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. On July 5, in a rally Colonel Jagannath Rao K. Bhonsale, the director of military bureau and other officers, announced that Netaji had taken over as the Supreme Commander of the INA. In the subsequent speech in the rally, Netaji said that the Army of Liberation would be incomplete unless women also came forward and take part in the fighting ranks and expressed his desire of forming a women's regiment after the name of the valiant rani of Jhansi, Laxmi Bai. In that rally he gave the INA their battle cry: "Chalo Delhi!" ("Onwards To Delhi!").⁸ On 21 October 1943 at a solemn ceremony in the Cathay Hall he declared the formation of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind (Free India) to the representatives of 3 million Indians in East Asia. The recognition of this government came from total nine countries, first from the three Axes Powers- Japan (23 October) Germany (29 October) and Italy (9 November) and later on by their allies.

In forming the unity of the Army Netaji completely separated religion from national sentiments. He said that "if you use religion to unite yourself today, you leave the door open for someone to attempt later to separate you using the same sentiment".⁹ As a Supreme Commander he built a close relation with his officers' corps. He made unannounced visit to the barracks of the ordinary soldiers of the Army and share meals with them. Soldiers from

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different religion and linguistic community dined together and a warm communal harmony developed between them.

“Jai Hind!” (“Victory to India!”) was chosen as the common greeting or salutation when Indians met each other. This salutation was later accepted by the Indian Army after independence. On 12 July 1943 the national anthem of the INA was chosen - Netaji was not happy with the song *Vande Mataram* as it hurt the religious sentiment of the Muslims and the Sikhs and when the women in the rally sang Rabindranath Tagore’s *Jana Gana Mana*, Netaji liked it. But it was written in Sanskritised Bengali and its language was not understood by most of the people. So, he gave the task to Abid Hasan Safrani and Mumtaz Hussain, a writer with Azad Hind Radio to translate it to simple Hindustani and Captain Ram Singh Thakuri was asked to give it a martial tune. Which resulted INA’s national anthem (*Qaumi Geet*) - *Sab Sukh Chainraki Barkha Barse, Bharat Bhagya Hai Jaga*. After independence the original Bengali version of the song was adopted as the national anthem of India. Hindustani, a mix of Hindi and Urdu written in Roman Script became the national language, but because of the large south Indian presence, translation into Tamil was provided in all public meetings. For the flag it was same as the flag of Indian National Congress but Netaji replaced the charkha which was the symbol of nonviolence by installed a springing tiger, the emblem of Tipu Sultan of Mysore who gave a strong resistance against the Britishers, signifying strength, fearlessness and tenacity in the fight for freedom. It was also featured as the emblem on the tricolour shoulder-pieces on uniforms.¹⁰

In Singapore, on 25 October Netaji addressed a mass rally of Indians and informed the declaration of war against the Anglo-American imperialists. The war was started and the first success came from Arakan’s Maya Vally where Major L.S. Misra’s army defeated the 7th division of the British Indian Army. The INA soldiers fought valiantly and entered Manipur with the Japanese forces. Under the leadership of Colonel Shaukat Malik of the Bahadur Group, soldiers unfolded and saluted the Indian Tricolour at the town of Moirang on 14 April 1944 and sang the *Qaumi Geet*. There were six groups under Colonel Mohammed Zaman Kiani who fought the battle: the Subhas Brigade under Lt. Col. Shah Nawaz Khan, The Gandhi Brigade under Lt. Col. I.J. Kiani, the Azad Brigade under Major Gulzara Singh, The Nehru Brigade Under Lt. Col. Aziz Ahmed Khan, The Bahadur Group under Lt. Col. Burhanud-Din and the Rani of Jhansi Regiment under Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan. During the Imphal War the INA soldiers especially from Subhas, Gandhi and the Azad Brigade gave a tough fight to the British Indian Army. But the continuous bombing of the American Air Force jointly with the Royal Indian Air Force disrupted the supply lines of

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arms, ammunition, equipment and medicines for the INA soldiers and it was accompanied by the quick arrival of monsoon. The Japanese and the INA forced to retreat. In August 1945 United States dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and with that Japan surrounded and INA also defeated.¹¹

After the surrendered of the INA, the officers were taken back to India and the Red Fort Trial of three of the INA officers: Shah Navaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon was started, who were accused of waging war against His Majesty the King under the Section 121 of the Indian Penal Code. This was followed by the trials of Abdul Rashid, Shinghara Singh, Fateh Khan and Captain Malik Munawar Khan Awan. The Indian National Congress called for the release of these soldiers and for that they formed the INA Defence Committee. A defence team was formed consisting lawyers like Bhulabhai Desai, Asaf Ali, Jawaharlal Nehru, Tej Bahadur Sapru, Kailash Nath Katju and Lt. Col. Harilal Varman. The Unionist Party, the Akalis, the Justice Party, the Ahrars in Rawalpindi, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha and the Sikh League wanted the trials to be discontinued. This period was the last campaign when the flags of Congress and Muslim League were flown together.¹²

British historian Michael Edwards states that the government of India hoped by prosecuting members of the INA it would reinforce the morale of the British Indian Army but in doing so they succeeded in creating unease, in making the Indian soldiers feel ashamed that they themselves had supported the British. If Netaji and his men had been on the right side and all the Indians now confirms that they were then the Indians in the British Indian Army must have been on the wrong side. The government of India slowly understand that the backbone of the British rule, the British Indian Army, might now no longer be trustworthy.¹³ Indians in the British armed forces became sympathetic towards the INA soldiers. INA gave the fighting spirit to the Indians against the British subjugation of their country. There were three upsurges - one on 21 November 1945 in Calcutta over the INA trials; the second on 11 February 1946 in Calcutta to protest against the seven-year sentence given to an INA officer, Abdul Rashid; and the third in Bombay of 18 February 1946 when the ratings of the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) went on strike for the flagrant racial discrimination, unpalatable food and abuses to boot during the INA trials. The mutiny spread from Karachi to Bombay to Vizag to Calcutta. There was also some minor but significant revolt in the Army Cantonments of Madras, Pune and Jabalpur. Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) men went on sympathetic strikes in the Marine Drive, Andheri and Sion areas of Bombay and in Poona, Calcutta, Jessore and Ambala units. Thus, Netaji's long-cherished dream of disrupting of loyalty of the British

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Indian Army for the British Crown had come true. Despite the protest the trials went on but the sentences were not carried out for the growing pressure from the public and Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army. The Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal Sir Claude John Eyre Auchinleck was forced to release the INA officers.¹⁴

Dr. Ramesh Chandra Majumder in his article *Ingrej Bharat Charilo kano?* (Why the English Left India?) gave three reasons of that- he wrote that Mahatma Gandhi built among his countrymen a strong desire for freedom which the Britishers could not restrict without the use of the Army and for the fight with Germany during the Second World War the Britishers were compelled to depend on the Indian soldiers but when Subhas Chandra Bose formed the Indian National Army the British officials realised that mainly based on the Indian soldiers they won and had been protecting their empire in India because of that they should not depend on them anymore. Hence, as soon as the Labour Party took the power in the United Kingdom, they decided to grant independence to India. On a visit to Calcutta in 1956, Clement Attlee was asked by then the acting Governor of West Bengal, Phani Bhusan Chakraborty about why the British left India in a hurry? Attlee, who was then just an ordinary citizen gave several reasons, the most important of which was INA's activities under Netaji and its effect on weakening the trust of the Britishers on the base of the British Empire in India, the British Indian Army.¹⁵

After Independence several leading INA members joined Indian politics and high offices of Government of India. Abid Hasan Safrani was one of them, who served as a Commander of the Gandhi Brigade of the INA, and later joined the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) under Nehru government. Most of Abid Hasan's positions in the Indian Embassies were as First Secretary. Abid Hasan appointed as the First Secretary in Cairo, Egypt in 1948 for the first time, then in Peking, China (1951), then in Bern, Switzerland (1954) and finally in Baghdad, Iraq (1956). Safrani's next position was as the Consul General in Damascus, Syria. In 1964, he was posted as the Indian Ambassador at Dakar, Senegal. His last posting was in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1966 as the Indian Ambassador. He retired in 1969 and returned to Hyderabad.¹⁶ Shah Newaz Khan was another such prominent Major-Generals of the INA who later joined Indian politics and received position in Nehru's Government. He was elected as a Member of Parliament from Meerut constituency in the first Lok Sabha election in 1952 and served as the Deputy Minister in the Railway Ministry till 1964. In the mid-60s and later in the early 70's he served in the Labour, Food and Agriculture ministries as well. Lakshmi Sahgal was the commanding officer of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of INA. She started her political career as a leftist politician from the early 1970's, and later on represented the

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Communist Party of India (Marxist) in the Rajya Sabha as a member. The All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) was started in 1980 and in its first conference in Madras she became one of the five vice-presidents of the organisation. She campaigned for the issues of social and economic justice, women's empowerment and preserving the secular character of our nation.¹⁷ In 1988 she was awarded the Padma Vibhushan, the second-highest civilian award of the Republic of India, by Indian president K.R. Narayanan. Major-General Jagannath Rao K. Bhonsle the Chief of the INA was elected to Parliament in the first general election and was appointed Deputy Minister for Rehabilitation under Nehru government. Later he served as Director of the National Discipline Scheme.¹⁸ Colonel Mahboob Ahmed was a Major of the elite Subhas Brigade of INA. He joined the IFS in 1949 and started his diplomatic career by holding significant postings to Burma and Iraq, which were followed by his appointment in 1956 as the Special Officer in charge of the Goa Liberation Movement. He served as the Consul General in Berlin from 1958 to 1961 and subsequently as the Deputy High Commissioner to Malaysia, Ambassador to Iraq, and Chief of Protocol in Delhi in 1971. From 1976 to 1979, he served as India's High Commissioner to Canada. After his retirement in 1979, he dedicated his extensive administrative expertise to public service, serving on the Eastern Region Reserve Bank Board, the Banking Recruitment Board, and as a trustee of the historic Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library in Patna.¹⁹ Anand Mohan Sahay was the Minister and Secretary-General in Netaji's Government. After independence he was nominated as the member of the Central Advisory Council of the Government of India on Labour in 1948. He joined the IFS in 1950 and was appointed as an Indian Ambassador to Caribbean countries, Mauritius and later on to South East Asian countries. While he was in the Caribbean, he organised several schools and other social and cultural institutions for the Indians there and in South East Asia he also played an important role in initiating Indi-Pak relations in those countries. In 1960 he retired from the IFS and settle at his birthplace Nathnagar, Bihar.²⁰

Though INA defeated in the military campaign but it exemplified a glorifying instance of unity among Indians, regardless of all parochial sentiments based on religion, caste, sex, age, ethnicity or linguistic groups under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose which the other political leaders of India could not able to maintain and resulted in the partition of the country based on religious lines. It was a kind of rejection of all that the INA stood for. For a progressive and robust India, we must safeguard the legacies INA of national dignity, equality, unity, communal harmony and secularism, which are immensely important to our society today.

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