

## **How India Fought British Imperialism: One Track Revisited**

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**“A war is won before it is fought”, The Art of War, Tsun Tsu.**

Leaders tread fresh grass, functionaries follow the beaten path. A leader can see afar, beyond what lesser mortals can see. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose was every-bit the leader.

On 18th August, 1945, in Taiwan, an Indian Nationalist hero died and a legend was born. Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, the stalwart most closely identified with militant Indian Nationalism, lost his life in harness, in an air crash, but earned the status of a martyr killed in war in the cause of his nation.

Netaji's fate is inextricably linked to the turbulent swirls and maelströms of World War II. Coerced by the British in 1939 into fighting for them via the British Indian Army, an act that excreted stench of riding roughshod over a nation's emotions and prompted the Indian National Congress-led provincial governments elected in 1937 to resign, but in spirit sympathising with Japan for the help rendered to Netaji and the Indian National Army, modern India maintains a balanced attitude to the war.

Netaji escaped from British-occupied India in January, 1941, reaching Germany after transiting through Russia under a nom de guerre with a passport given by the Italian Embassy in Kabul. He had hoped to lead an army to British-occupied India through Russia but the German attack on Russia on 22nd June, 1941, upset his plan. He looked upon the attack on Russia as a major mistake on Germany's part, opening a new front before the British had been crushed. En passant, a flashback is in order here. In late 1940, while the German Foreign minister Otto von Ribbentrop was talking to his Russian counterpart Vyacheslav Molotov in Berlin, the British Air Force raided Berlin prompting von Ribbentrop to take Molotov to a bunker. In the bunker, von Ribbentrop said that the British had been defeated. Molotov answered “If that be the case, why are we here and whose are these bombs which fall?”.

Netaji got an opening, however, when Japan shed its sitzkrieg in China and attacked the United States of America by bombing Pearl Harbour in Hawaii on 7th December the same year. With the finesse of a ninja, on 25th December, Japan captured Hong Kong and on 15th February, 1942, Singapore from the British. Japan's blitz expanded and the sun at noon was blazing. Had Netaji been able to come to Asia then, the momentum of the Indian National Army and Japan together with the Congress's Quit India Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi could well have knocked the British out of India. Md. Ali Jinnah (whose politics contrasts strongly with that of another Muslim leader, Mustapha Kamal Ataturk of Turkey) and his Muslim League and their British co-conspirators would have been thrown out of action and the division of India may never have taken place. A unified free India may have been born at the end of the war. Cyril Radcliffe may never have had the chance to be the agent for killing and displacing millions by scrawling lines on a map. The machinations of Lord Wavell and Lord Mountbatten would have been defeated.



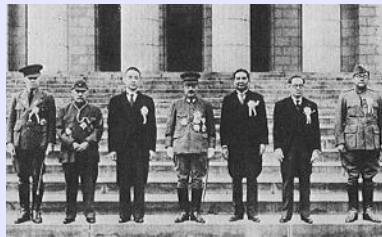
Japan's greatest expansion in 1942

On 17 February 1942, two days after the Liberation of Singapore, some 45,000 Prisoners-Of-War of the British Indian Army gathered at Farrer Park where they were welcomed by the Japanese, who pledged their support for India's Independence. Capt. Mohan Singh was announced as leader and he called upon the Indians to form an army to free India. Almost 20,000 soldiers immediately came forward to join what became the INA.

A question mark may be why could not Netaji come to Asia in early 1942? Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the United States of America gave very stiff resistance to the Japanese in the Philippines and the speed at which Japan had hoped to conquer the archipelago was therefore slowed down considerably and Japan needed six months to drive the Americans out completely from the Philippines. Also the Kuo-Ming Tang under Chiang Kai-Shek and the Chinese Communist Party under Mai Zedong sank their differences to fight the Japanese together in China.

After the defeat of the Afrika Korps of Germany under the command of General Rommel to British forces under General (later to be Field Marshal) Montgomery at El Alamein in Egypt, Germany was defeated by the Russians at Stalingrad with the surrender of Field Marshall von Paulus and his troops to Marshall Zhukov. In the meantime, in the Pacific, Japan's expansion was halted after the indecisive battle with the United States Navy under the command of Admiral Nimitz over Port Moresby in Papua-New Guinea and the defeat of the Japanese Navy under the command of Admiral Yamamoto at the Battle of Wake Islands. All this occurred before Netaji could come to Asia. Throughout 1942, at the fringes of affairs and waiting in the wings, Netaji saw the tide of the war turning before he could come to Asia in 1943.

Netaji left Germany on 8th February, 1943. After a three-month journey by submarine, and a short stop in Singapore, he reached Tokyo on 11th May, 1943, where he made a number of radio broadcasts to the Indian community, exhorting them to join in the fight for India's Independence. On 4th July 1943, two days after reaching Singapore again, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose assumed the leadership of the INA in a ceremony at Cathay Building. Netaji's influence was notable. His appeal not only re-invigorated the fledgling INA, his appeals also touched a chord with the Indian expatriates in South-East Asia as local civilians, ranging from barristers to plantation workers, having no military experience, joined the INA doubling its troop strength. A youth wing of the INA, comprising of 45 young Indians personally chosen by Netaji and affectionately known as the Tokyo Boys, was also sent to Japan's Imperial Military Academy to train as fighter pilots. Also, for the only time outside Russia, a women's regiment, the Rani of Jhansi regiment was raised as a combat force.



Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose led the Provisional Government of Free India. It operated in those parts of India which were liberated from British occupation in World War II. With its provisional capital at Port Blair on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands after they were freed from the British, the state lasted two more years until August 18, 1945, when it officially became defunct. During its existence it received recognition from nine governments: Germany, Japan, Italy, Independent State of Croatia, the Wang Jingwei Government in the Japanese-controlled parts of China, Thailand, Burma (under Ba Maw), Manchukuo, and the Philippines under de facto (and later de jure) president José Laurel.

The Indian National Army (INA) or the Azad Hind Fauj was the army of the Provisional Government of Free India ) which fought along with the Japanese 15th Army during the campaign in Burma, and in the Battle of Imphal, during World War II. The INA lives and survives strongly in Indian public memory and the present Government of India is the heir to the legacy of the freedom fighters including Netaji. The INA was extensively supported by the Japanese

Government, both militarily as well as politically. The Japanese Army assigned Hideo Iwakura and Major-General Isoda to the Indian National Army as its military advisers. The clarion calls of the INA were "Jai Hind" and "Give me blood and I will give you freedom".

The INA was a very effective combat force, having faced troops of the British and their allies and made its mark in the Battle of Imphal, as well as the battles of Arakan and Burma. On 18th April 1944, squads led by Col. Shaukat Malik broke through the British defence and captured Moirang in Manipur. The Free Indian Administration took control of this independent Indian territory. Following Moirang, the advancing INA breached the Kohima road, posing a threat to the British positions in both Silchar and Kohima. Col. Gulzara Singh's column penetrated 250 miles into India. The INA Brigade advanced, by outflanking the Anglo-American positions. However, INA's most serious, and ultimately fatal, limitations were the reliance on Japanese logistics and supplies and the total air-dominance of the British and their allies, which, along with a supply line deluged by torrential rain, frustrated the INA's and their Japanese allies' bid to take Imphal. The INA was forced to retreat.

It might be worth mentioning that Shyam Benegal in his magnum opus "Bose: The Forgotten Hero", shows Netaji sitting beside the Japanese ambassador in Berlin watching a film on the British and their protégés in Singapore surrender to Major-General Fujiwara. We can assume that this took place sometime in March, 1942. Cut to Netaji's meeting with Adolf Hitler where the Nazi leader was bluntly told that his invasion of Russia was a colossal mistake. The next shot in Kiel Harbour with Netaji boarding a German submarine was in 1943. Minute details of Netaji's activities in 1942 are absent.

A note finale might be in order. It has come to light that the British instructed their secret agents to assassinate Netaji as soon as they discovered that he was no longer in British-occupied India. Thus, it is possible that British agents engineered the air crash at Taipei (then Taihoku). Like a true soldier that he always was Netaji embraced a soldier's death. In life and in death he remained true to the Latin precept 'Jam non concilio bonus, sed more so percurdus, ut non recte facere posim, sed nisi recte facere non posim'.

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