



Review Article


A Native's Memoir on Indian National Army's Battle of Manipur

Dr. Leivon Jimmy Kom*

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Dhanamanjuri University, Manipur, India

Corresponding Author: *Dr. Leivon Jimmy Kom

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>The Indian National Army's campaign in Burma and the North East India during WW-II have shaken the British Empire to the core. For the first time, an organized campaign was undertaken through the roughed terrain against the colonial empire, and against all odds. It may be deemed as a failed campaign, but the implication of the campaign upon the natives who had come across the experiences gives an everlasting memoir. The paper is a historical narrative focused on the larger contexts of the consciousness so formed against the colonial government.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 13-01-2025 ▪ Accepted: 09-02-2025 ▪ Published: 27-02-2025 ▪ IJCRM:4(S1); 2025: 31-33 ▪ ©2025, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes
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KEYWORDS: Indian National Army, World War II, Manipur, Japanese Empire, Colonial government

INTRODUCTION

The battle of the INA in Manipur has been retold many times; and it has become a history today. But for many native historians, it is not a subject dealt with keen interests due to their association with the dreaded Japanese Empire in particular and their atrocities in South East Asia in general. This lack of interest on native freedom fighters and the INA brave hearts has led many noted historians skipped the INA campaign from the pages of Manipur's history. Most studies on the INA and the battles in Manipur are pioneered through the souvenir published during the commemorative events of the INA, such as the Silver Jubilee,

1970 and the Golden Jubilee celebrations, 1995; occasionally held at its INA Museum at Moirang, Manipur. Here in this souvenir, researchers came across the role played by the locals and inhabitants of Moirang (a small town in the South of Manipur), where edited works appear in honour of them for the first time. These works, lying in sketches and a few written documents in local dialects (Manipuri language written in Bengali script), upon careful examination, bring to light a gap in understanding some historical contributions and factors that had immensely magnified the cause of the INA in particular and the national freedom in general.

The campaign of the INA was genuinely a pan Indian Movement, as it was a much-awaited campaign launched by nationalist leaders and millions of Indian expatriates across various South East Asian countries. It has, as its antecedents, the Indian Independence League headed by Rasbihari Bose who had escaped to Japan after his failed attempt to assassinate the Viceroy Lord Hardinge entering Delhi in 1912. The Indian Independence League converged into a Provision Government of Free India with the entry of Subash Chandra Bose to the scene. This government received financial aids and contributions from Indian abroad such as traders, merchants, workers and labourers. The personnel were mainly derived from the captured Indian soldiers designated as Prisoners of War (POWs). With the help of Japanese forces, the INA campaign overrun Burma and succeeded in planting the first Tri Colour Flag in Indian soil at Moirang and other North Eastern states of India. This Pan Indian dimension raises an interesting issue on the Manipuris (the people of Manipur) today, on how and in what ways they are linked by common experience to the nationalist ideas, shared problems and contextual similarities in ideals and aspirations with Indian freedom struggle.

The Odds

This campaign was considered as one of the most crucial events as the INA was able to strike against the British India with a full military might for the first time. Two tiny frontier Indian states bordering Burma, Manipur and Nagaland, were almost liberated in this campaign. Many soldiers were also sacrificed, many were captured and many returned back to be lost in the jungles of Burma (Myanmar). According to one source, the INA campaign sacrificed 30000 Japanese soldiers and 60000 INA soldiers. Most of the Japanese soldiers belong to the 33rd Division commandeered by Lt. General Yanagida. The INA men belong to three brigades which were led by Colonel Malik. Only few were fortunate enough to see the light of freedom dearly won two years later in 1947.

Azad Hind was popularly known as the first free government of United India. It means the Army of Free India. Originally, it owes its existence to a lesser-known organization founded by Subash Chandra Bose, known as Free India Centre while taking a refuge in Germany after his escapade from the House Arrest in Bengal. But later, the Centre was upgraded to a Diplomatic Mission with funds loaned from Germany. It was equipped with a broadcasting radio stationed at Berlin, Germany for its propaganda mission to reach out to the Indians at home and abroad. The official flag of Azad Hind was the Congress Tri-colour flag with a springing tiger enshrined in the middle of the flag. It uses Hindustani in Roman Script as its official language. Ittefaq (meaning Unity), Etmad (meaning Faith) and Kurban (meaning Sacrifice) became the living motto of the INA. Although Hitler and Mussolini were sympathetic to the Indian cause, Bose's desire to free India could not be materialized because India was too far from Europe. As such, Bose travelled to Japan, another powerful empire ruling over a vast swathe of South East Asian countries.

The Azad Hind had its ideology deeply rooted in the belief that empire rise, grow and fall. The British empire which enslaved

the country (India) had risen and grown awaiting to fall unless it transformed into a federation of free nations. According to Bose, India's struggle for independence to free itself from the colonial clutches was at its last stage. The British Empire was already weak, and more so weakened by the onset of the Second World War. Thus, Bose believed that time was ripe for the Indians to strike and fight as the enemy at hand was about to fall. Bose, therefore, gave the clarion marching call "Delhi Chalo" or "Onward to Delhi". There was such a conviction in him that, the Azad Hind and its Azad Hind Fauz, also known as the Indian National Army would emerge victorious in this war for freedom. Through the mouthpiece of the Azad Hind Radio, Bose declared on February 19, 1942, that "The fall of Singapore means the collapse of the British Empire, the end of the iniquitous regime which it has symbolized and the dawn of a new era in Indian history."

Initially, the Azad Hind Fauz or (INA) was mainly composed of Indian captives and prisoners of war who had surrendered to Japan during the Singapore campaign. According to an estimate, the INA had 65,000 soldiers. Of these sixty-five thousand soldiers, forty thousand of them were prisoners who had surrender to Japan after the fall of Singapore. These soldiers were reinstated and re-engaged into different ranks of the INA. However, about five thousand soldiers, mostly officers refused to join the INA. Thousands of civilians who were members of the numerous local branches of the Indian Independence League also provided support functions of various kinds to the INA.

The INA had many divisions and was well organized. The first assault division that went into action in India- Burma campaign was headed by Mohammad Zaman Kyani and had about ten thousand soldiers. These division was again divided into three regiments or Brigade, each named after Gandhi, Nehru and Azad. On the advised of field marshal Terauchi, the Commander of Japanese forces in South East Asia, the best soldiers from these three brigades were selected, trained and sent to India against the British forces. This brigade, originally named No.1 Guerrilla Regiment, later came to be known as the Subash Brigade. The rests of the INA divisions was proposed to join the Subash Brigade later. The INA also had an Intelligence wing known as Bahadur Group headed by Soukat Ali Malik. Besides these divisions, the INA had also established a Women Regiment known as Rani of Jhansi Regiment. This regiment was headed by a medical doctor named Lakshmi Swaminathan from Madras. It enlisted members mostly from the Indian expatriates and migrants scattered across the countries of Malaya and Burma.

Entry into India's Eastern Gate: Manipur (& Nagaland)

As stated above, the INA's leadership was determined to enter India and overthrow the British Empire. In a radio broadcast, Bose announced that "No power on earth will be able to prevent my crossing Rash frontier once again to participate in the last phase of our national struggle". The INA was all set to march. Accordingly, on midnight of October 23-24, 1943, Azad Hind declared war on Britain and her allies. The much anticipated and well trained Subash Brigade of the INA marched alongside three Japanese Army Divisions (the 31st, the 15th and the 33rd) and

crossed the India-Burma border in the early part of April, 1944. The 31st Division was under the command of Lt. General Sato; the 15th Division under Lt. General Yamauchi, and the 33rd Division under Lt. Gen. Yanagida. In particular, the 33rd Division of the Japanese army seized Manipur's Southern Hill ranges and continued their onslaught successfully. Failing to defend their ground, the British Division 17 confronting the combined forces of the Japs Army and INA, had to abandon their fences and retreated till Bishnupur towards the South (A small district in the valley of Manipur). For the INA, it was a march to Delhi for which Manipur happened to be the Eastern Gate.

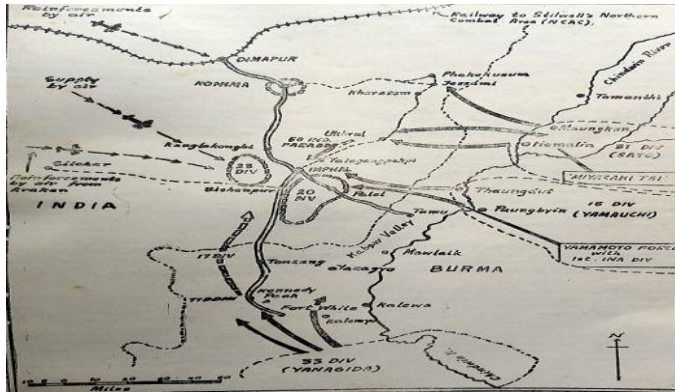


Figure 1: An artist's illustration of the Japs-INA onslaught on Manipur

CONCLUSION

The war in Manipur did not go in vain. Indeed, the participation of the Manipuris during the WW I in France brought political consciousness among the hills as well as the plain people of Manipur. The impact of the WW II and INA campaign created an even more effective and powerful stimuli among the natives. In fact, Manipur felt the rising consciousness for the independence of the country. For many locals, the campaign in Manipur was a chance to assert their national identity. It was an opportune time to prove their sense of nationalism against the British imperialism. Joining the contingents of freedom fighters in the INA was not only a revolutionary ambition, it was also most certainly not welcome by the moderates and the mainstream political parties during India's freedom struggle. It was not only against the law of the land but also scarred by the legitimacy of little claims. Although it was a failed campaign, it won the hearts of the nation except for the unknown possible circumstances on the mysterious disappearance of Subash Chandra Bose whose declassified files are out of public domains. The effect of the war was that, due to their association with the Japanese forces, the general public began to possess a broader view of the political developments taking place in the land. It is said, that Manipur had shunned an isolationist view and gained a World View.

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