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How important was Imphal to Netaji during World War-II: Revisiting the spirit of Netaji in the presence and absence of Japanese forces

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Abstract

With the outbreak of the World War II in the year 1939, Japan, an emerging imperial power to reckon with, joined the war in favour of Germany. By 1942, Japan had occupied almost all areas of South-East Asia, de-establishing British installations all over the region and eventually made advances into the soil of the Indo-Burma Frontiers. The South Eastern part of Asia became an important war zones between the Allied and Axis forces to gain mastery over the region. The Japanese occupation of South-East Asia had made Manipur into a buffer zone between Japan and British India. After the conquest of Burma in 1943, the Japanese were in deep dilemma, whether to go ahead or to consolidate whichever has been conquered. It was not the original plan of Japan to fight the allies on Indian soil. But after much hiccups, the persistent insistence of Netaji pays off in winning over the hearts of its ally, the Japanese for an Indian invasion. The event had brought the war to the doorstep of the British Empire and Manipur became the last stronghold of the Allies in the region. It was during this critical juncture the strategic significance of Manipur for that matter the valley of Imphal began to occupy paramount importance to Netaji for realization of his 'India's independence'. Netaji dreamt that Imphal could be utilised as a 'Spring-board' for furthering an Indian campaign by entering the Brahmaputra valley. It was his hope that defeating the allied forces at Imphal, would enable his army in many-fold, be it in terms of men, arms & ammunitions besides others. Equally for the allies too, keeping Imphal under its control counts a lot for launching counter offensives, for this very reason keeping Imphal under its control occupies a topmost priority for both the allies and INA-Japanese forces during this critical juncture of the on-going WW II. The Paper discusses at length the strategic importance of Imphal/ Battle of Imphal, for it is going to decide the destiny of these two contesting forces. The Paper also discusses the INA-Japanese relationships in the course of the war in this region, Last Days of the INA and its contributions in hastening India's Independence.

Keywords: Imphal, Kukis, Japanese, Netaji, WW-II

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Introduction

The World once again witnessed another devastating war after the horrific war that came to an end with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. However, the Peace Treaty that was signed failed to bring any lasting peace. The Second World War began from 1939, and drags on till 1945, out-numbering the First World War in terms of casualties, loss of human lives, destruction of properties etc. The South Eastern part of Asia also became an important war zone between the Allied and Axis forces to gain mastery over the region. Japan, an emerging Asiatic power to reckon with, an adversary of the Allies embarked on an offensive spree in this region, thereby enabling herself as an important power to reckon with. The Japanese attacked on Pearl Harbour in December, 1941, though acted as a worst setback for Japan in the long run; it can also be viewed as a show of strength – an emerging Asiatic power in the making. Gradually, Guam, Wake Island, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malay Peninsula and other important key positions of the allied establishments in the region got decimated.

By 1942-43, Burma (present day, Myanmar) too came under Japanese forces. After the conquest of Burma, the Japanese were in dilemma – whether to go ahead with further expansions or to consolidate which ever have been conquered so far? It was not the original plan of Japan to fight British power in Indian soil, ever since its occupation of Burma in 1943. The event of Indo-Japanese expansionism in the region had brought the war to the doorstep of the British Empire and Imphal became the last stronghold of the Allied counter attack. It was during this critical juncture the strategic importance of Manipur for that matter the valley of Imphal occupies paramount importance to both the allied and Indo-Japanese forces. Netaji was of the opinion that the capture of Imphal, was considered strategically important, a necessity for starting an Indian revolution on a wider scale. This area according to Netaji was Britain's '**Maginot Line**' in India. He, therefore, opined that the capture of Imphal would be followed by the installation of the Provisional Government of Free India rooted with the hope that it would possibly offer the opportunity to organize Indians for an anti-British uprising throughout the country. For the Allied forces too, keeping Imphal under its control occupies paramount importance, the last resort to prevent any further Indo-Japanese advancements.

According to Netaji, Imphal could be utilized as a '**Spring-board**' for furthering Indian campaign by entering the Brahmaputra valley. It was the hope of Netaji that after the fall of Imphal, the INA forces will be thus multiplied many-fold, in terms of arms and ammunitions man-power besides others, for the Indian soldiers serving under the allied forces will automatically join the Indo-Japanese camp. For this very reason keeping Imphal under its control occupies a topmost priority to Netaji during this critical juncture of the on-going World War Second. The Japanese occupation of South-East Asia had converted Manipur into a buffer zone between Japan and British India. The event had brought the war to the doorstep of the British Empire and Manipur became the last stronghold of the Allied counter attack. After the conquest of Burma by the year, 1943, the Japanese were planning for their

next move, whether to defend what they had already conquered or to push on to India.² It was not the original plan of the Japanese forces to fight the war on Indian soil nor did they think that was feasible when they declared war against the Allied Powers on 8th December 1942. The delayed in taking a concrete decision only gave time to the Allies for counter offensives.

The Delayed Imphal Campaign

Reexamining the task of capturing Imphal, the Japanese's initial hesitation was finally overcome, for this a number of factors are found to be responsible, firstly, the thought of leaving Imphal untouched, the last stronghold of the Allies could be a great blunder committed by Japan, for, from Imphal, massive counter offensives can be undertaken by its adversary forces, which will in turn threaten its hold on Burma in particular and the rest of the newly conquered territories in general, secondly, the constant insistence and appeals put forth by Netaji for forward expansion, besides other factors. In recent past new hypothesis has also come up as result of intense research work, which is suggested to be one of the factors in augmenting the Indo-Japanese forces to undertake the Imphal Campaign. As per documented archival records, it is learnt that while the Indo-Japanese forces were still in Burma, some group of people rushed in there and contacted with them. A Central Intelligence Officer (Assam) E.T.D. Lambert, in his report, has noted that the Kukis first contacted the Japanese in and around the area in the Chindwin belt, south of Homalin, in the Somra Tract and Kabaw Valley in 1943. Lambert has also remarked that some Japanese agents entered the country, east of Ukhrul, to contact the Kukis before the invasion.³ It was Paokhomang Kuki of Shakok village, who had first contacted the Japanese and was 'largely instrumental in getting Tongkhothang*, Chief of Chassad to visit the Japanese in Burma.⁴ In November 1943, Tongkhothang, Chief of Chassad crossed the Chindwin River, where he contacted the Japanese requesting four hundred (400) rifles to fight the British.⁵ In his Report on the Hill people of the North-East who helped the Japanese and the Indian National Army, ETD Lambert stated that 'the Chief of Chassad, Tongkhothang and the Japanese held three meetings at Chassad, Maokot and Nungse and urged people to supply men and guides to the Japanese⁶ and to arrest the men who helped the British and to inform the Japanese of such men.⁷

One captured Japanese document noted:

'The Kuki contact is increasing and was about sixty in thirty villages in the middle of October 1943. The Kukis living east of a front line company of enemy line outposts in Ukhrul area

² Laishram Churchill, (2009), Situating Manipur in the Geopolitics of Imperial Powers, an Article in- Alternative Perspectives, Economy, Polity, History & Culture. Published by Centre for Alternative Discourse, Manipur, p.14

³ "Notes on Kuki Situation", Assam State Archives, Dispur, p.1

⁴ GSC, SL. No.1663, File No. 45/C, 1945: Frontier Intelligence Branch (Assam), Fortnightly Report No. 2/45, for the Second half of January 1945, p.1

***Tongkhothang is the son of Lhukhomang, @ Pache, Chief of Chassad, an influential Kuki chief during Anglo-Kuki War, 1917-1919**

⁵ File No.XLI, Cabin No.29, Manipur Secretariat Library, MSL, Imphal

⁶ Special Branch Papers, ASA, Dispur. See also, ETD Lambert, dt.25.10.1944, 'A Note on the Kuki situation in Manipur State as a result of the Japanese Invasion,' File No.XLI, Cabin No.29, 'Japanese war, MSL, Imphal, p.3

⁷ ASA, GSC, SL. No. 1591, 140/c, 1944: E.T.D. Lambert Secret Memo. 21/Police (5)-II/428-30, F.I.B, C.I.O, Shillong, 15.11.1944 to RCR Cumming, IGP, Assam

are co-operating with us (Japanese), including the headmen. We expect everyone's co-operation when we advance, as these people are helping our agents by concealing them and assisting in their infiltration at the risk of themselves...our agents find it easier to travel through the district 25km wide, along the west bank of Chindwin river, where majority of the natives are of the Kuki tribes".⁸

As far as popular support was concerned, one account estimated that 2:1 majority of the Kukis was on the side of the Indo-Japanese, and almost all the headmen would report about the movement of the Allied troops. One INA Field concisely noted that the Kukis were 'pro-Japanese and INA' and 'many of them are now working with us in buying us our rations'.⁹ It must have been due to all these positive developments taking place, besides Netaji's persistent pleas for forward Indian invasion, coupled with the thoughts of possible allied counter offensives, the initial hesitations on the part of Japanese forces on onward campaign might have been won upon. This very incident of local Kuki tribesmen rushing inside Burma and meeting them (Indo-Japanese forces) to work hand in hand, might have been perceived as a symbolic gesture of 'welcoming' them, which in turn might have inspired and strengthened the INA-Japanese forces to embark on, with high hopes in mind that they would surely be given a warm welcome when landed. True to their estimation, the Indo-Japanese forces indeed received a warm welcome by the local Kuki population, for they were seen as 'Liberators' to liberate them from hated colonial regime. Here the timely arrival of Kuki tribesmen into the scene is significant. Hypothetically put, had there been no timely arrival by the Kuki tribesmen at this critical juncture, despite Netaji's persistent insistences, the possibility of onward invasion by the coalition forces into Manipur was very remote or might not have happened even, given the Japanese's stance and hesitancy at the initial stage of fighting the allies on Indian soil, besides other impracticability factors, such as inaccessible jungles, difficult terrain, unknown land and people. The timely arrival by the Kuki tribesmen saved the day, thus policies and strategies to be undertaken were formulated for onward campaign.

The INA-Japanese advancement into Manipur

The Indo-Japanese planned to attack the Allied headquarters at Imphal from broadly four directions - along the Teddim road in the south, the Tamu-Pallel road in the south-east, the Chamu-Sangshak road in the east, and the Jessami-Kohima road in the northeast. The final aimed was to launch a massive attack on Imphal and get hold of it at all costs- Imphal,, the last and the lone standing allied fortress in the region.

The following was the strategy pursued by the Indo-Japanese forces:

- (a) The Japanese 33rd Infantry Division under Lieutenant-General Genzo Yanagita would surround and destroy the 17th Indian Division at Tiddim, then attack Imphal from the south.
- (b) Yamamoto Force, formed from units detached from the Japanese 33rd and 15th Divisions under Major-General Tsunoru Yamamoto (commander of 33rd Division's Infantry Group), would destroy the 20th Indian Division at Tamu, and then attack Imphal

⁸ INA Records, INA/255, p.16, NAI, New Delhi

⁹ INA Records, INA/3: Report of the 1st Div. Azad Hind Fauz, dated 19 May to 30 June, 1944, p.1, NAI.. New Delhi

from the east. The force was supported by the 14th Tank Regiment, equipped with 66 assorted tanks, under Lieutenant Colonel Nobuo Ueda and the 3rd Heavy Artillery Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Kazuo Mitsui.¹⁰

- (c) The Japanese 15th Infantry Division under Lieutenant-General Masafumi Yamauchi would surround Imphal from the north. This division was still arriving from road-building duties in Thailand and was below its strength at the start of the operation
- (d) In a separate subsidiary operation, the Japanese 31st Infantry Division under Lieutenant-General Kotoku Sato would isolate Imphal by capturing Kohima on the Imphal-Dimapur road, then exploit his success by advancing to Dimapur.¹¹

At the insistence of Subhas Chandra Bose, leader of the Azad Hind, the Indian National Army made a substantial contribution. (Originally, the Japanese intended using them only for survey and propaganda.)

- (a) Units of the First Division (initially the Subhas Brigade or 1st Guerrilla Regiment, less a battalion sent to the Arakan) covered the left flank of 33rd Division's advance.
- (b) The 2nd Guerrilla Regiment was attached later in the battle to Yamamoto Force.
- (c) The Special Services Group, re-designated as the Bahadur Group acted as scouts and pathfinders with the advanced Japanese units in the opening stages of the offensive. They were tasked to infiltrate through British lines and encourage units of the British Indian Army to defect.¹² During the early part of the offensive, the Bahadur Group of the INA apparently achieved some success in inducing British Indian soldiers to desert.¹³

The situation in 1944

At the start of 1944, the war was going against the Japanese on several fronts. They were being driven back in the central and south west Pacific, and their merchant ships were under attack by American submarines and aircraft. In south East Asia, they had held their own lines over the preceding year, but the Allies were preparing several offensives from India and the Chinese province of Yunnan into Burma. In particular, the town of Imphal in Manipur on the frontier with Burma was built up to be a substantial logistic base, with airfields, encampments and supply dumps. Imphal was linked to Dimapur in the Brahmaputra valley by a road which wound for 100 miles (160 km) through the steep and forested Naga Hills.¹⁴ Imphal, the capital town of Manipur was held by the IV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant-General Geoffrey Scoones. The corps was in turn part of the British Fourteenth Army under Lieutenant General William Slim. Because the Allies were planning to take the offensive themselves, the corps' units were thrown forward almost to the Chindwin River and widely separated, and were therefore vulnerable to being isolated and surrounded.

- (a) 20th Indian Infantry Division occupied Tamu. The division was untried but well-trained.

¹⁰ Louis Allen(1984), *Burma: The Longest War*, Dent Publishing, London, pp.221-224

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid, see also, Peter W. Fay (1993). *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942-1945*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, p.285.

¹³ Peter W. Fay,p.296

¹⁴The Situation in 1944, on the eve of the Indian Invasion, free encyclopedia

(b) 17th Indian Infantry Division occupied Tiddim, at the end of a long and precarious line of communication from Imphal. The division, which had two brigades only, had been intermittently in action since December 1941.

(c) 23rd Indian Infantry Division was in reserve at Imphal. It had served on the Imphal front for two years and was severely under strength as a result of endemic diseases such as malaria and typhus.

(d) 50th Indian Parachute Brigade was north of Imphal, conducting advanced jungle training.

(e) 254th Indian Tank Brigade was stationed in and around Imphal.¹⁵

In the course of his (Netaji) preparations for the Imphal Campaign he shifted the headquarters of his Provisional Government from Singapore to Rangoon on January 7, 1944. For the Liberation of India from the British control, he insisted that the INA should spearhead the Imphal operation, but the Japanese General Kawabe objected to give an independent role to an army which was very small in size in relation to its Japanese counterpart and its credential as a fighting force was largely untested.¹⁶

Netaji also thought that the capture of Manipur and Chittagong which were considered strategically important was a necessity for starting an Indian revolution. These areas according to him were Britain's Maginot Line in India. He, therefore, planned that the capture of Imphal would be followed by the installation of the Provisional Government of Free India which would have offered it an opportunity to organize Indians for an anti-British revolt. He said, "Thereafter the repercussion inside India and within the ranks of the British Indian Army would be so great that nothing will then prevent the outbreak of an Indian revolution".¹⁷ To create revolutionary conditions, Netaji was prepared to unleash an intensive propaganda which would urge Indian civilians to sabotage British war efforts and Indian armed forces to withdraw their loyalty to British.¹⁸ The bases in liberated areas would then be strengthened and such bases must, Bose hoped, "bear an unblemished record of healthy nationalism and robust patriotism".¹⁹ Netaji had to consider other important aspects, as for example, - the basis of co-operation between the Japanese and INA forces. In his negotiation with General Kawabe, Commander-in-Chief of East Asia, he insisted that the Japanese and the INA would enjoy equal status in all respects. This was at first not acceptable to the Japanese for the Japanese troops underestimated the INA men and abstained from showing the INA officers the usual military courtesies. It was however later on agreed between the two that the INA was to enjoy equal status with the Japanese army. But this agreement did not have binding

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Prof.Hari Hara Das & Bc Nath;(1997), Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: Reassessment of his Ideas and Ideologies, Pointer Publishers, Jaipur,p.174

¹⁷ Lal Dena, (1991), 'INA Movement', in Lal Dena (ed) History of Modern Manipur (1826-1949), Orbit Publishers, New Delhi, p.75(hereafter, Lal Dena, INA Movement)

¹⁸ V.S Patil, (1988); Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose- His Contribution to Indian Nationalism, Sterling Publishers, Private Limited, New Delhi,p.152

¹⁹ Lal Dena, INA Movement, op.cit,p.176

influence on the Japanese army which had earned infamy for its cruelty and high-handedness.²⁰

As regards the administrative arrangements for the liberated areas, Bose envisaged two phases of civil administration: (I) the Azad Hind Dal, which was to follow on the heels of the military vanguard, and perform urgent tasks such as handling of refugees, feeding the people in newly occupied areas, restoration of essential public services, maintenance of law and order and reconciliation with the Indian population; (II) as soon as an area ceased to be operational, a provincial administration would take over, and this would function until the future government of Free India was established.²¹

Bose and Gen. Kawabe also agreed that territories liberated on Indian soil must be handed over to Major-General A. C. Chatterjee, Governor-designate of liberated areas. But the Japanese High Command in Tokyo was not inclined to accept the agreement. Bose had taken more time and spent a great deal of effort in procedural wrangles than he could reasonably have afforded, at a time when the Pacific war was raging and a decisive victory was necessary. What was most important was how these agreements were to be carried out in practice. Bose did his best to enthuse his soldiers with his own patriotic zeal. Undoubtedly, the INA's enthusiasm was unbounded. They were motivated by high patriotic feelings, whereas the Japanese were motivated more by their strategic interests than their concern for India's freedom.²²

The Japanese and the INA forces started the operation on 4th February 1944. The INA troops, to whom the task of liberating India was assigned, were to fight with the Japanese division and an independent role was assigned to the Subhas Regiment. The INA forces had captured Tiddim, crossed the Indo-Burma frontier and set foot on Indian soil on 18th March 1944 amidst scenes of jubilation. "The uncontrollable urge to press forward and plant the tri-colour flag on the soil of India was so great that by the early hours of the morning of 19 March, INA troops were rushing down the hillside, racing with one another to be the first to cross the border and fall prostrate to kiss mother India's".²³ By 19th March, the powerful Japanese formations of the 31st Division were ferociously attacking the Indian Parachute Brigade and a British battalion covering Ukhrul. Desperate fighting ensued for two days and two nights with heavy casualties on both sides, and eventually Ukhrul was captured on 21st March. Simultaneously, a bitter ten days fighting ensued at Shangshak, eight miles south of Ukhrul; and on 30th March, Shangshak also fell into the hands of the INA and the Japanese forces and eventually all the roads into Imphal were effectively blocked. Sustained by this rapid success, the supreme commander in Tokyo announced the fall of Imphal. In fact, from the second week of April to the end of May, 1944, the Japanese controlled the Dimapur road

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid, p.177

²³ Ibid

from Kanglatombi to Mao. Fighting on this sector was, however, mainly done by the Japanese forces, with the INA playing only an auxiliary role.²⁴

In April, the Gandhi Brigade under Col. M. Z. Kiani, and the Azad Brigade under Col. Gulzara Singh with Gen. Yamamoto's force rushed to the Imphal front via Tamu-Pallel road, their immediate target being Pallel airfield. *On 28th April, 1944 the Gandhi Brigade established the Brigade's headquarters at a village named Khengjoi (a Kuki village in the Indo-Burma border) which was 18 miles from Chahmol, the divisional headquarters of the INA's 1st Division.*²⁵ There was no close co-ordination between the two forces, the Japanese planned a thrust from the east on 1st May and the INA forces were to attack from the south on the same date. The INA forces eventually prepared for the night attack as agreed upon. It was Bose's hope that in the actual encounter with the British Indian Army, propaganda, not fire-power, would decide the day. Pritam Singh, leader of the Bahadur Group* was to follow his instruction in letters and spirit and he actually tried to induce the Gurkhas not to fire. Failing in the endeavour the post was attacked and the slogan 'Chalo Delhi' was raised. Things would have been different if the Japanese had not betrayed their Comrades, and had attacked according to schedule. Col. Kiani attributed this defeat chiefly to the Japanese failure to support the INA force.²⁶

The Hikari Kikan (Japanese intelligence organization) which was responsible for supplying whatever the INA required was not immediately available. In spite of poor equipment and hardships the INA forces had fought gallantly but since prompt assistance either from Col. Kiani or Gen. Yamamoto was not forthcoming, they ultimately surrendered.²⁷

On the South front the INA and the Japanese troops fared comparatively better. Their rapid northward advance along Teddim road into the valley of Manipur indeed upset all British military calculations. In this region, the local population greatly helped the INA-Japanese forces to a great extent as a result of which Saikot and its surrounding areas were bombed by the Allied forces.²⁸ Lt. Col. Motozo Yanagida's unit reached Torbung, some kilometers (50Km) from Imphal on 10 April and Churachandpur was captured on 12 April.²⁹

The Japanese and the INA forces further advanced towards Bishenpur (through the western hill ranges, locally known as the Thangting Hill ranges) and occupied a southern stretch of fertile land for five months from the 2nd week of April to August, 1944. The question here arises when Moirang was captured. The fact that Moirang Panchayat still continued to

²⁴ Ibid. p.178. See also, Louis Allen, op.cit, p.216

²⁵ H.N Pandit, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose-From Kabul to Battle of Imphal, Sterling Publishers Private Ltd, 1988, p.273

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ File No.29, Cabin No.XLI, "Jap War". Manipur Secretariat Library, Imphal

²⁹ Lal Dena, INA Movement, op.cit, p.179

*** The Special Services Group, re-designated as the 'Bahadur Group' acted as scouts and pathfinders with the advanced Japanese units in the opening stages of the offensive. They were asked to infiltrate through British lines and encourage units of the British Indian Army to defect**

function till 21 April, 1944 would seem to suggest that normal life at Moirang was not so much disturbed. John A. Thivy, who gave an eye-witness account of the Azad Hind movement, maintained that Moirang was captured on 18th April. M.S Kiani recorded in his book that the event took place on 23rd April. He claimed that this was the most authentic account of the INA and the Azad Hind Government based on the original official records. Whatever might be the truth; this much is clear that Manipur and Nagaland had not been liberated yet on 14 April, despite the fact that Imphal had been encircled almost on all sides by the INA and their allies.³⁰ However, 14th April has been observed as INA Day since a longtime back.

The fate of the Japanese offensive in South-East Asia was much dependent on the outcome of the 'Battle of Imphal'. This can be gleaned from the Special Order of the Day issued by General Mutaguchi: which reads as- 'This operation will engage the attention of the whole world and is eagerly awaited by 100,000,000 of our countrymen. By its very decisive nature, its success will have a profound effect on the course of the war and may even lead to its conclusion. Our mission is thus of greatest importance and we must expend every energy and talent in the achievement of our goal'.³¹ By April 1944 the Japanese were on the verge of capturing Imphal, but the British troops with support from Royal Air Force, Indian (British) Air Force and American Air Force withstood the Japanese offensive.³² The unprovoked attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 was a total counter-productive incident, the blunder thus committed resulted in Americans, joining the war on the side of the allies.

The Japanese had realized that operations ought to be broken off as early as May. Lieutenant General Kawabe had travelled north to see the situation for himself on 25 May. *Several officers whom he interviewed expressed confidence in success if reinforcements could be provided, but actually concealed their losses and the seriousness of the situation.* At a meeting between Mutaguchi and Kawabe on 6 June, both used haragei, an unspoken form of communication using gesture, expression and tone of voice, to convey their conviction that success was impossible³³, but neither of them wished to bear the responsibility of ordering a retreat. Kawabe subsequently became ill with dysentery and perhaps physically unfit for duty. He nevertheless ordered repeated attacks, stating later that Bose was the key to Japan's and India's future.³⁴ As the result, siege of Imphal was lifted because of the failure of Japanese Air Force to reinforce its army and the INA troops.³⁵

³⁰ Ibid, p.180

³¹ Evans, Geoffrey and Antony Brett-James, (1962), Imphal- a flower on lofty heights, London: Macmillan, p.111

³² Laishram Churchill, (2009), Situating Manipur in the Geopolitics of Imperial Powers, an Article in- Alternative Perspectives, Economy, Polity, History & Culture. Published by Centre for Alternative Discourse, Manipur, p.16

³³ Louis Allen, op.cit, pp.265-266

³⁴ Ibid, p.310

³⁵ Lal Dena, INA Movement, op.cit, p.180

The Battle of Imphal took place in the region around the city of Imphal, the capital of the state of Manipur in North-East India from March until July 1944. Japanese armies attempted to destroy the Allied forces at Imphal and invade India, but were driven back into Burma with heavy losses. Many historians considered it to be the biggest Japanese defeat of the war on land.³⁶

The most important contribution to the Allied victory was made by both British and American transport aircraft. The Allies could fly men, equipment and supplies into the airstrips at Imphal (and Pallel until the onset of the monsoon rains), so although cut off by land, the town was not without a lifeline. By the end of the battle the Allied air forces had flown 19,000 tons of supplies and 12,000 men into Kohima and Imphal, and flown out 13,000 casualties and 43,000 non-combatants. Among the supplies carried during the siege was over a million gallon of fuel, over a thousand bags of mail and 40 million cigarettes. Several thousand mules, many shipped from the Argentine, were used to supply outlying outposts, for example 17th Indian Division up the Bishenpur trail, so animal fodder was also flown in during the siege. The Allied aircraft could also parachute ammunition, rations and even drinking water to surrounded units.³⁷

Besides, during the sieges of both Kohima and Imphal, the Allies relied entirely on resupply by air from British and American aircraft flying in from India and over 'the Hump' (Himalayas) from China until the road from the railhead at Dimapur was cleared.³⁸ At Kohima, due to the narrow ridgelines, accuracy in the dropping of air delivered logistics proved to be a considerable problem and as the fighting intensified and the defended area decreased, the task became harder and more dangerous.³⁹ The increasing dominance of Allied airpower by this stage of the Burma campaign was a major contributor in helping the Allies turn the tide of the war in this theatre. Allied air supply enabled British and Indian troops to hold out in positions that they might otherwise have had to abandon due to shortages of ammunition, food and water, as reinforcements and supplies could be brought in even when garrisons were surrounded and cut off.⁴⁰ Conversely, the Japanese found their own supply situation harder to resolve and in the end it was one of the deciding factors in the battle.⁴¹ The suspension of the offensive was inevitable. It should be pointed out that the offensive was carried out mainly by the Japanese. The total strength of the INA forces was about 8, 800, whereas the Japanese had 57,000 combatants and the Allied forces had 155,000.⁴²

The painful yet inevitable decision to suspend the offensive was at last taken on 26 July. In his special order of the day on 14 August, Bose talked of the suspension as a **tactical**

³⁶The Battle of Imphal, March-July, 1944, Free Encyclopedia

³⁷ Louis Allen, op.cit,p.244

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "The Battle of Kohima, North-East India, 4 April – 22 June 1944".Ministry of Defence (UK). 2004. p. 9.

⁴⁰ Martin Brayley, (2002). The British Army 1939–45: The Far East. Osprey Publishing, London p.10

⁴¹ Louis Allen, op.cit, p.288.

⁴² Lal Dena, INA Movement, op.cit,p.180

withdrawal. Bose asserted that the loose conduct and corruption of his officers was responsible for the sad state of morale in which desertion was possible. True, the desertion had been a clear failure of leadership.⁴³ Apart from the low standard of the INA officers, the origin and manner of their training also greatly counted. Very few of them had received even a three months course at the INA Officers' Training school.⁴⁴ Even the sympathetic Fujihara comments: "As a revolutionary army, its morale was high and it was quite well organized, but the standard of its tactics, training and leadership was low. It lacked in particular, offensive strength and tenacity'. Another serious drawback was that the INA in action had no wireless sets, no telephones, no transports, and no weapons other than light machine guns. It would seem that while one cannot question Bose's patriotism, one has to see whether in such a sophisticated war 8,800 men without much training, equipment, ammunition and transport supplies could have been a force to reckon with.⁴⁵

The timing of the campaign also coincided with the 'weakening of Axis' Power position in the Pacific. Bose faced many handicaps. Most important, he was not able to enlist the co-operation of the nationalist leaders deeply involved in the struggle for freedom through non-violent means under the leadership of MK Gandhi. It was also difficult for him to make the nationalist leaders in India see eye to eye with him since he had allied himself with Fascist forces who were viewed as hostile and antagonistic. Another serious setback was that the INA leaders were unable to get adequate support, moral, or material, from their own countrymen.⁴⁶ Also the Imphal Operation failed because of the weakness of the Japanese army. Mutaguchi said, "I still believe that Imphal could have been taken had the three divisions been as good as my 18th Division (which he commanded in 1941-42).⁴⁷ Cooperation and coordination among the Japanese commanders of the three Divisions failed.⁴⁸ Besides, shortage of supplies, equipments, aeroplanes etc. was another reason for the defeat of Indo-Japanese army at Imphal.⁴⁹

A Japanese writer, Toshikazu Kase gives the following account of loss to Japan in the war: "Our expeditionary force of 2, 70,000 men which had marched to the gates of Imphal in India met defeat. Most of this force perished in battle, or later died of starvation. The disaster of Imphal was perhaps the worst of its kind yet chronicled in the annals of war". One of the regimental commanders, who survived the retreat called me in Tokyo, "He told me how the ranks had thinned daily, as thirst and hunger overtook the retreating columns and how the sick and the wounded had to be abandoned in hundreds. In order to avoid capture, these men were usually forced to seek death at their own hands. Only 70,000 of the original force

⁴³ Ibid, p.182. See also, Peter W. Fay, op.cit, p.287

⁴⁴ Lal Dena, INA Movement, op.cit,p.182

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ Fred Saito & Tatsuo Hayashida, (1973); "To Delhi! To Delhi! (1943-45)", A Beacon Across Asia, Ed, Sisir K.Bose, Orient Longmans Limited, Delhi,p.207

⁴⁸ Ibid,p.208

⁴⁹ V.S Patil; (1988), Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose- His Contribution to Indian Nationalism, Sterling Publishers, Private Limited, New Delhi, p.154

survived".⁵⁰The INA also lost about 4000 soldiers in the Imphal operation, and the remaining comprised the sick and wounded. The role played by the INA was indeed heroic. A Japanese newspaper wrote when Netaji visited Japan, (3rd time on 1 November 1944):

"The fact that the Indian National Army fought side by side with the Japanese Army on the Indo-Burma border under the handicap of shortages of all kinds of supplies should go down as a glorious chapter in the history of the Indian Independence movement".⁵¹

Netaji's INA Refusal for Retreat

Even as the Japanese army retreated, the INA dared to advance. Colonel Kiani refused to obey Japanese orders for evacuation and insisted that he would continue the march deeper into India.⁵²Even after the disastrous Imphal campaign and the subsequent retreat of the Japanese forces from the region, Bose wanted to stay close to the Indian border and refused to retreat to any place south of Mandalay under any circumstances. But he could not have his way due to the general war situation which had become too disadvantageous to the Axis Powers in general and Japan in particular.⁵³ The revolutionary spirit of Netaji was never dampened even after the surrender of Japan. After hearing the shattering news he first broke into a smile and said:

"So that is that. Now, what next?"⁵⁴

"Japan's surrender was not India's surrender. Japan's surrender was not the surrender of the Liberation Forces fighting for India's freedom. He would not admit defeat".⁵⁵Even after a decisive Anglo-American victory in Europe and the surrender of Japan, the bitter-struggle against the British in East Asia had to be continued.⁵⁶ Netaji had not given up his hopes of victory. He encouraged his men to prepare for final victory and he worked towards that end.⁵⁷ He (Bose) asked his soldiers not to be disheartened. He was conscious that 38 crores of people living in India were looking to him and the INA as to what would be their next step:

"Be, therefore, true to India, let not your faith in India's destiny be shaken. There are many roads to Delhi. And Delhi is still our goal. The sacrifices of your immortal comrades and yourselves will certainly bring us victory. There is no power on earth which can keep India in bondage. India will certainly be free and, that too, soon, Jai Hind".⁵⁸

⁵⁰ Toshikasu Kase; Eclipse of the Rising Sun,p.92

⁵¹ Hayashida Tatsuo; (1970), Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: His Great Struggle and Martyrdom, Allied Publishers, Bombay,p.96

⁵² V.A Patil; op.cit.p.155

⁵³ Hari Hara Das;(1983), Subhas Chandra Bose And the Indian National Movement, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi,p.292

⁵⁴ Ibid. See also Hugh Toye, The Springing Tiger,p.179

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp.292-293

⁵⁷ V.S Patil, op.cit.p.155

⁵⁸ Huge Toye, op.cit.p.169

As the war (WW II) was coming to a close with a decisive Allied victory on almost all fronts, Bose was forced to leave Burma with a heavy heart, but his faith in the destiny of India remained unshaken:

"I am leaving Burma with a heavy heart. We have lost the first round of our fight for Independence. But we have lost only the first round. There are many more rounds to fight. In spite of our losing the first round, I see no reason for losing heart".⁵⁹

Last Days of the Indian National Army (INA)

With the re-occupation of Kohima and Imphal, coupled with retreat of the Japanese-INA forces in the region, the allied forces began the Burma campaign the following year; however, the INA remained committed to the defence of Burma, and was a part of the Japanese defensive deployment. The second division, entrusted with the defence of Irrawaddy and the adjoining areas around Nangyu, was instrumental in opposing Messervy's 7th Indian Division when it attempted to cross the river at Pagan and Nyangyu during the Irrawaddy operations. Later, during the Battles of Meiktila and Mandalay, the 2nd division was instrumental in denying the British 17th Division the area around Mount Popa that would have exposed the Flank of Kimura's forces attempting to retake Meiktila and Nyangyu.⁶⁰

However, as the Japanese withdrawal from Burma progressed, the other remnant soldiers began a long march over land and on foot towards Bangkok, along with Subhas Chandra Bose. The withdrawing forces regularly suffered casualties from allied airplanes attacking them, clashes with Aung San's Burmese resistance, as well as Chinese guerrillas who harassed the Japanese troops. Even before the end of the war in South Asia, the INA prisoners who were falling into Allied hands were being evaluated by forward intelligence units for potential trials.⁶¹ A small number had fallen into Allied hands in 1943 around the time of the Imphal campaign and subsequent withdrawal, while larger numbers surrendered or were captured during the 14th Army's Burma Campaign. A total of 16,000 of the INA's 43,000 recruits were captured, of whom around 11,000 were interrogated.⁶²

At the time of Japan's surrender in September 1945, Bose left for Manchuria in an attempt to contact the advancing Soviet troops, and was reported to have died in an air crash near Taiwan.

Thus, in this way, the heroic struggle of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and his Indian National Army came to an end. Hence, Bose dreams of liberating India from the British domination vanished to thin air, with his untimely demise in 1945.

⁵⁹ Selected Speeches of Subhas Chandra Bose. p.240

⁶⁰ Jayant Dasgupta, (2002), Japanese in Andaman & Nicobar Islands: Red Sun over Black Water, Manas Publications, Delhi, pp.67& 87. See also, L.P. Mathur Kala Pani. (1985) History of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands with a study of India's Freedom Struggle, Eastern Book Corporation, Delhi, pp249-51

⁶¹ Peter W. Fay, op.cit, p.436

⁶² Ibid.p.459

Even though the movement failed, the trial of INA men in the Red Fort evoked considerable emotion even among those sections of the nationalist leadership which had no sympathy for Bose's alliance with Fascist forces. India owed them debt because their spirit of sacrifice hastened the process of freedom of the country.⁶³

Conclusion

The failure to capture Imphal dashed the dreams of Netaji, of his 'vision' of a countrywide revolution against the British rule, expecting that Imphal could be utilized as a springboard for furthering Indian campaign against colonial rule. This failure hurt and pained him, but he is not down, a true leader, a true patriot. He was of the opinion that getting a foothold in Imphal was necessary even without the total destruction of the enemy, as it would have helped the Provisional Government of Free India because from there the INA could have sent out batches of guerrillas into India to start partisan warfare all over the country. Again, in case the Japanese managed to conquer Imphal, the surrender of the Indian sepoy in the British Army would certainly added up fighting force, arms and ammunitions besides others. Netaji's vision was that after capturing Imphal, the INA with amalgamation of the prisoners of war (PoW) would become the largest single force, bigger than the Japanese Army, and beyond doubt, larger than the British element in the forces deployed in eastern India. With its strengthened INA men, a forward campaign inside India could be undertaken. Netaji knew very well that the result of the Battle of Imphal concerned India much more than Japan. Whatever happened here, Japan was sure to be defeated in the War as shown clearly by the results of the fighting in the Pacific. Japan's interest in the Imphal Campaign was more of strategic concerned for the safety of its newly conquered territories than India's cause. The relationship between INA and the Japanese force were far from being cordial from the very start, but Netaji has to endure all the odds as having an ally such as Japan is a necessity to realize his dream of liberating his mother country from a mightier force. As given in the aforementioned paragraphs, the Japanese underestimated the INA men as a fighting force to reckon with, in terms of basic training, possession of arms and ammunitions, discipline, besides other negativities. One can rightly see the grave blunder committed by Japan, the resultant of which was disastrous. Had there been no Pearl Harbour blunder, the course of the war might have been a different one.

Though, the INA Movement in its fight for India's freedom saw a pre-matured death before realization of its targeted goal, nevertheless Netaji's INA fight for the liberation of India was never in vain, for it led in hastening India's independence in 1947.

⁶³ Lal Dena, INA Movement, op.cit,p.182