

Subhas Chandra Bose in Burma (1943-1944)

Excerpts from the Unpublished Diary of Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe (Japanese)

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Abstract

The article presents translated excerpts from 17 entries about Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose from Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe's diary. Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe was the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief of the Burma Area, Japanese Army during the period March 1943 to August 1944. The diary was maintained in Japanese and has been translated in English by Mrs Akiko Seki. The entries are dated between 29 July 1943 and 01 September 1944 and document the General's views regarding his meetings with Bose and his high regard for the latter's personality and competence.

Introduction

By mid-1943, the Jap-typhoon had washed off the British forces from Burma. The British Governor and his cabinet were gone, and a new order headed by a well-known Burmese leader, Dr. Ba Maw, had taken charge of the country. Subhas Chandra Bose, who had moved to the eastern sector by now, was mighty pleased with these changes, for in them he saw an opportunity of transforming his slogan of 'Chalo Delhi' into a working reality. He made Singapore his headquarters.

The article has been translated from Japanese to English by Mrs Akiko Seki.

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Bose in conference with Lt. Gen Kawabe (right)

Short of time, Subhas moved at stupendous speed: For instance, he assumed the leadership of the Indian Independence Movement in East Asia on 4 July 1943; took up supreme command of the *Azad Hind Fauj* (INA) on 25 August; and formed the Provisional Government of Free India on 21 October 1943. The following nine countries recognised the new regime: Japan on 23 October; Germany on 24 October; Burma on 25 October; Philippines on 26 October; Croatia on 27 October; China and Manchukuo on 1 November; Italy on 9 November and Thailand on 18 November. On 23 October, Subhas declared war on Britain and the US.¹

Over anxious to get to the war front, Subhas took some time off his official duties at the headquarters and visited Mingladone, a town about 20 km from Rangoon, to discuss his future plans at the front and established working relationship with Lieutenant General Maszuka Kawabe, the Commander-in-Chief of the Japanese Burma Army.

The present diary of Lieutenant General Kawabe tells the story of what happened next. The first entry in the diary is— Subhas arrived at Mingladone (29 July 1943). The next three entries are dated 22 October, 23 October and 24 October 1943. This was

perhaps Subhas's second short visit. He shifted his headquarters from Singapore to Rangoon on 7 January 1944. The entries in the General's Diary begin to appear again from 4 October 1944 and there are 17 entries. The last entry is dated 1 September 1944 when the General was called back from Burma. The taste of pudding, they say, lies in eating. The usefulness of the Diary as a precious source of information for a historian can be appreciated only on going through the short diary.

Lieutenant General Maszuka Kawabe was, we are told, difficult-to-understand type of Japanese officer. But, as the Diary shows, he was a totally different man insofar as his dealings with Subhas were concerned. Right on the very first day, when he met the General at Rangoon (29 July 1943), the General seems to have developed a sort of great liking for him. He found a dignified person in Subhas, and called him 'today's crop', a Japanese expression for a man of the hour.² Kawabe's liking for Subhas deepened further when the latter shifted the headquarters of his Government and the Army to Rangoon in January 1944. The two 'Generals' became good friends; unlike high-ranking Japanese officers of those days, Kawabew always tried to understand the point of view of his Indian friend. The latter reciprocated quite favourably.

The unpublished (in 1980) Diary of Lieutenant General Kawabe was very kindly supplied to me, when I was in Japan, by my friend Mr Kenji Yashiro, a Japanese writer from Tokyo. All the entries relating to Subhas and INA reproduced here in the present paper were translated into English by my another Japanese friend, Mrs Akiko Seki, whose contribution to our freedom struggle has been acknowledged by such eminent persons as Rash Behari Bose, Raja Mahendra Pratap and Justice Radha Binod Pal. The letter of Subhas Chandra Bose to General Kawabe, reproduced at the end, was very kindly given to me by the General's daughter.³ I am most grateful to all of them.

The Diary

July 29, 1943

Mr. Subhas Chandra Bose arrived at Mingladone⁴ at 11 a.m. He called on me at my official residence at 3 p.m. We talked with the help of an interpreter about routine matters. I have the impression

that Mr. Bose is a man of strong will. I invited Mr. Bose to dinner. I was very much impressed by the seriousness that he took his business with, as also by his firm determination, cultural refinement, and courteous and respectable behaviour. I have come to hold him in high esteem. I see him quite capable of having stood against Mahatma Gandhi⁵ as a leader believing in armed revolution.

Regarding his various proposals pertaining to his INA, I think, these were too simplistic and vague. I cannot but feel doubtful as to his having seriously pondered over these proposals in his mind. In fact, what I worry about is how competent are the persons around him⁶. Anyway, I must listen to what he says, and make use of his special capabilities as much as possible.

Col. Yamamoto⁷ has been in close association with Mr. C. Bose since Berlin days. He might serve well as an advisor to Mr. C. Bose, but I think, he can't be entrusted with the work of advising him on stratagem and administration. Who will take responsibility for these things? Mr. Sen⁸ is reported to be an authority on Indian affairs, but I don't know about his background. Apparently he does not seem to be a suitable person to be an assistant to Mr. C. Bose in the matters relating to administration, etc. There is another person, Mr. Maruyama⁹, the priest of the Nichiren sect. He is reported to be a disciple of Rev. Fuji.¹⁰ He worked at the battlefield of Akyab. I have never met him myself. (He can be considered for being an assistant). In the present circumstances, I do not think we can have some other organization like the Hikari Kikan¹¹. Mr. C. Bose is a dignified person. He is today's crop.

Friday, October 22, 1943

On my way back to my residence, I visited the Ambassador's¹² home and prayed for his safe journey to Japan. We talked about the future of Burma and relations between Baw Maw¹³ and Mr. C. Bose.

Saturday, October 23, 1943

Siren once. Today's news broadcast gave that Lord Mountbatten returned from Chung Ching to Delhi on the 21 October. The news about the establishment of Provisional Government of Free India was made public.

Sunday, October 24, 1943

At 2 p.m. Colonel¹⁴ came on behalf of Mr. C. Bose to thank us (Japan) for the establishment of the Provisional Government of Free India¹⁵. We toasted with Sake,¹⁶ expressed our joy, and sent hearty congratulations.

Tuesday, January 4, 1944

I talked with Katakura¹⁷, staff officer, about Mr. C. Bose, and the problem of appointing supreme advisor to him. Name of Nobutoki Ide was given. I could not reject it, though I know Mr. C. Bose wanted to have Mr. Chiwa.¹⁸ I think he is not suitable for Mr. C. Bose. It was very strange that the name of Mr. Mustuharu Homma was also given.

Thursday, January 6, 1944

Mr. C. Bose will be coming to Rangoon tomorrow.

Friday, January 7, 1944

On the way to my office in a car, I saw many cars running in a line on the road. It indicated the arrival of Mr. C. Bose.

At 4 p.m. President C. Bose accompanied by Head of the Women's Unit¹⁹, Chief Secretary²⁰ who speaks good Japanese, and Cabinet Ministers visited. I welcomed them and told that I have sent a part of the INA to the front. He (Subhas) expressed his gratitude for the Japanese Army in allowing the transfer of headquarters of the Provisional Government of Free India.²¹ He repeated his usual wish that the entire I.N.A. be sent to the front very soon.

I invited Mr. C. Bose to dinner. Our Ambassador²² also attended. In reply to my greetings, Mr. C. Bose said in all seriousness: I pray to God only one thing, and that is, that we may go to the front and be able to shed our blood for the Motherland at the earliest. He again requested to send his soldiers to the front.

The food was a strange mixture of the Japanese and Western things. Mr. C. Bose drank a lot, ate much. The head of the Women Unit who was sitting on my right side was feeling quite at home.

After the party dispersed, Mr. C. Bose and Mr. Tanaka,²³ staff officer of General Army, stayed back, and we talked till 11 p.m. Soon after there were air aids.

Sunday, January 9, 1944

Our Ambassador called on me, and told me that Mr. C. Bose had expressed his keen desire to go to the front lines. He wanted to know what the reaction of the Japanese Army was to his proposal.

Tuesday January 18, 1944

Col. Katakura informed me that Mr. C. Bose had written a letter of protest about the Japanese Army's treatment of the INA²⁴. Mr. C. Bose has taken up the issue of saluting the Japanese personnel by the INA men²⁵ and also the overall Japanese control of the INA²⁶. The language that he had used was reported to be very strong. I felt very bad about this unpleasant thing, but I thought it was not the time for racking up such matters. I, therefore, agreed to what he said about the saluting business. This was just to save his face. But regarding overall control of the Japanese army and the unified command, I told Col. Katakura to persuade (Bose) not to hinder execution of war operations like that. Such problems bring setback.

Wednesday, January 19, 1944

I thought it necessary to give a definite reply to Mr. C. Bose's proposals, so I asked the staff officer to send a letter to him (Subhas). But afterwards I thought it was better to settle it verbally through Col. Katakura.

Thursday, January 20, 1944

Col. Katakura reported that he had met Mr. C. Bose and that they had talks for three hours. The result was a success after all. Mr. C. Bose was convinced of the correctness of our approach.²⁷ It is important, nevertheless, that we keep him telling the theoretical details of the war.

Saturday January 22, 1944

Dr. Ba Maw gave a garden party at his residence at 7 p.m. it was attended by about more than 500 prominent persons in full dress or in uniform. I attended in an informal suit as I was in a great hurry. Mr. Bose and his Provisional Government's officials were also there. The head of the Women Unit wearing uniform was all the time with Mr. Ba Maw. She behaved very gently.

Saturday, March 18, 1944

Col. Katakura came to report about the general war situation. He also reported about his discussions with Mr. C. Bose. The talk will be a good reference point when I meet Mr. C. Bose this evening. In the evening Lieut. Col. Isoda²⁸ came to report the recent condition of the I.N.A. Then Mr. C. Bose came. I explained to him two points: The importance of unified command; and special feelings of the occupied area people towards war.

I tried to clear misunderstandings between India and Japan. Mr. C. Bose appreciated my stand and said that he had discussed these matters only because he desired full co-operation between the two countries. We moved to the dining room.

Thursday, March 21, 1944

Mr. C. Bose made an official statement.²⁹

Wednesday, March 29, 1944

I attended a tea party given by the Provisional Government of Free India at 5 p.m. I thanked Mr. C. Bose and others for their hearty co-operation. It lasted for more than two hours. Mr. and Mrs. Ba Maw, other prominent Burmese and our Ambassador, officers of the Hikari Kikan and chief of the staff officer, Suzuki, also attended the party.

I attended with Mr. C. Bose the Japan-India Co-operation Conference held at Kaikesha Hall. We were observers. In the anteroom I promised Mr. C. Bose to supply quinine for the army in the event they entered Imphal.

Wednesday, April 5, 1944

Before starting for the front, Mr. C. Bose came to see me. I advised him not to be swayed by the propaganda of the enemy if there was some pause; and to take a firm stand even if the international situation got worsened.

I could see he was full of determination. This determination can be seen on his brows also when he speaks. My impression of Mr. C. Bose is quite different from what I think of Mr. Baw Maw.³⁰

Tuesday, April 18, 1944

Lieut. Col. Isoda came from Meimyo and told me of his negotiations regarding the question as to who should be the chairman of the Indo-Japanese War Co-operation Council³¹ consisting of the Japanese Army and the Provisional Government of Free India. Mr. Bose insisted that the IJWCC be chaired by him. I had consented to this on the advice of Major Katakura to keep Bose's face. But I have not much interest in that matter now.

Wednesday, April 19, 1944

It was decided after all that the Co-operation Council be not put into effect. Obviously, the question as to who should be the chairman fell through.

I read a book entitled 'Topography of India' by Rev. Kozui Ohtani, and was impressed by his deep knowledge of the subject.

Sunday, May 7, 1944

Presentation ceremony of an airplane to the President of the Provisional Government of Free India, Mr. C. Bose, was held under the chairmanship of Major Watari.³²

Tuesday, May 9, 1944

Two ministers and chief secretary Mr. Sahay called on me at 4 p.m. to report about the situation on the front on behalf of the President. According to Mr. Sahay, they are in very much need of mechanized guns, as well as rifles. He also requested to give more medical facilities for the injured and sick soldiers, and adequate supply of vehicles. One of the ministers was again that Head of the Women Unit, Captain Lakshmi. She would often but in while others were talking as if she were of the same rank as others. At any rate, I earnestly wish to let them enter Imphal as quickly as possible.

Thursday, June 22, 1944

I called on Mr. C. Bose at his temporary residence at 4 p.m. for I wished to know whether he was attending a celebration party at Dr. Ba Maw's residence tomorrow³³. I wanted to apprise him beforehand his (Dr. Ba Maw's) position.

He (Bose) described the situation at the front as he saw it on the occasion of his recent inspection tour of the forward area. He stated in no uncertain terms his desire to fight to the last. He also proposed to go to the front again. I argued very hard with him against this, but he did not say 'all right'. Impressed by his enthusiasm, I promised him to reconsider his proposal. Besides this, he emphasized as before, to order advance of the rest of the INA, including even the Women's Unit, to the front.

It seems Indians will not lose their fighting spirit, no matter how long the war may continue. They will gladly face all sufferings as long as they do not accomplish their great objective— independence. That is why he (Subhas) is doing all that he can do to achieve his objective under the Japanese command. Though it is not an unusual thing, I felt something very encouraging the way he talked. It was owing to his wonderful moral power.

Wednesday, July 12, 1944

I ordered a staff officer to explain the general situation of war to Mr. C. Bose, and at the same time to inform him that the INA was sent back by compulsion. Mr. C. Bose seemed to understand the circumstances. However, he earnestly requested the staff officer to send the troops to a place as near the Indian borders as was possible, and not to send them to the south of Mandalay.

Friday, September 1, 1944

After a little rest, I called on Mr. C. Bose to bid him farewell. I told him almost the same thing as to Mr. Baw Maw whom I visited at 11a.m. the same morning at his residence. Mr. Baw Maw was shocked to hear about my leaving Burma. I conveyed to him however, that there will be no effect on the relations between Burma and Japan. Mr. Bose received me calmly, as if he had expected my leaving Burma. He requested me to convey to the Tokyo Government that there would be no change in his decision to fight no matter how the war situation in the East and West might turn. He put emphasis on improvement of the channel of contact between the INA and the Japanese army; and for this he suggested a direct channel between the two and not through Hikari Kikan. Finally, he agreed to entrust the repairs of war weapons and machines to the Japanese army. He is a sincere man with practical approach.

I had heard that Mr. C. Bose was worn out. But to me he looked quite healthy.

The diary is, as noted above, indeed a valuable source of information. It would be helpful in understanding how Subhas Bose faced terrible situations with cool head, stone-hard determination, great moral courage and following 'Tagore line', confronted fearful odds with head kept high. The Japanese General who saw him in those depressingly gloomy days appreciated his these qualities of head and heart, his patriotism, devotion to duty and love for his motherland and people to the hilt.

Endnotes

¹ For more details on these developments, as also for the Diary, see K C Yadav, Akiko Seki, eds. *Adventure into the unknown: the last days of Subhas Chandra Bose*, Gurgaon, 1996, pp. 18-24.

² See *The Diary*, 29 July 1943.

³ The original letter was given by me to Shri Sisir Kumar Bose, Netaji's nephew, for being kept at the Netaji Research Bureau, Kolkata.

⁴ Military base about 20 km from Rangoon city.

⁵ He refers to the Bose-Gandhi conflict of 1939.

⁶ He means the Japanese intelligence persons.

⁷ He was military attaché to the Japanese Embassy in Berlin when Bose was there. He was shifted to this sector to assist Bose and was made chief of the Hikari Kikan.

⁸ Major He also served with Hikari Kikan.

⁹ A Pro-Gandhi Buddhist monk; taken into honorary service by the Japanese army authorities for creating good will between Indians and Japanese.

¹⁰ A famous Buddhist monk of the Nichiren sect, also known as Guruji; highly respected in Japan and elsewhere 'for his eminent religious activities and pacifist movement'. See, for details, his autobiography, *My Non-Violence* (Tokyo, 1975). He was closely connected with Gandhiji. He received the 'Nehru Peace Prize' for his outstanding contribution to world understanding and peace.

¹¹ A liaison- section for co-ordination between Japanese military authorities and INA.

¹² Col. Akiko Ishi I, the Japanese Ambassador to Burma.

¹³ The first Premier under the 1937 reforms, he later became President of Independent Burma under the Japanese.

¹⁴ Name not mentioned. He was Shah Nawaz Khan.

¹⁵ The Provisional Government was founded on 21 October 1943.

¹⁶ Japanese liquor.

¹⁷ Lieut. Colonel; he became friendly with Netaji; retired as Lt. General after the war.

¹⁸ All army officers; connected with intelligence activities.

¹⁹ Capt. (Dr.) Laxami Swaminathan

²⁰ Mr. A. M. Sahay.

²¹ The headquarter was shifted, 6 January 1944.

²² Col. Akiko Ishi I.

²³ Major in rank.

²⁴ General Kawabe wanted the INA forces to be split up into small detachments to be attached to the Japanese units for mostly non-combatant work, like spying, sabotaging, etc. Bose objected to this and the INA units were kept intact under their own officers. Secondly, Bose objected to the INA being treated as an inferior army, subordinate to the Japanese. Theirs was an ally army of an equal status, he said. The Japanese authorities at Rangoon accepted the proposal.

²⁵ Some Japanese insisted upon being saluted by the Indians without any consideration of their seniority etc. To this Bose objected. There was a lot of misunderstanding. But ultimately Bose's proposal was accepted: The junior man of the either force would salute his senior irrespective of the fact whether he came from India or Japan. However, if the two officers , Indian and Japanese, held the same rank, they would salute each other at the same time.

²⁶ This, however, remained unchanged.

²⁷ To fight under the overall control of the Japanese operational command.

²⁸ Successor of Col. Yamamoto as chief of the Hikari Kikan; later promoted as general; good friend of Bose.

²⁹ On 18 March 1944, the INA crossed the Burma border and kissed the sacred soil of their motherland. The great news was given to the world by Subhas on this day (21 March, 1944) in a special proclamation.

³⁰ Dr. Ba Maw believed in show off, but Subhas was entirely different from him. He meant a serious business.

³¹ The IJWCC was meant to function on the Indian soil after it was captured by the INA and Japanese forces. The Japanese insisted that a high-ranking Japanese official should be the chairman of the Council. But Netaji said 'no' and insisted on his being the chairman. The Japanese showed reluctance, but when Netaji threatened to write to Tokyo, they accepted his proposal.

³² Bose had made a request to Tojo for an airplane. Tojo ordered the Southern Command to give a plane. The Southern Command gave an eleven-seater plane manned by the Japanese crew. Bose got Indian Tricolour containing the springing Tiger (national emblem) in its centre painted on the both sides of the plane's nose. Besides, Netaji also desired to have the Japanese crew substituted by Indian crew. However ,the proposal was not accepted for the sake of safety.

³³ Relations between the two leaders were strained at this time.