

Impact of INA on India's Struggle for Independence

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Introduction

The scene, a cramped, spartan room 60 feet by 25 feet on the third floor of the historical Red Fort in Delhi. A Court Martial is in progress. There is a low platform at one end, covered by coir matting. On this are placed a row of tables for members of the court, who sit solemnly. Prosecution and Defence face each other. There is a special enclosure for the Press and about 150 seats for relatives and others. The trial of the three brave Indian National Army (INA) officers had opened on 5 Nov 1945. They were Colonel Shah Nawaz, Colonel Prem Sahgal and Colonel Gurbaksh Dhillon. On 29 Dec 1945 the Judge Advocate summed up. On 31 Dec 1945, the court met briefly to record particulars of character and service; and on 3 Jan 1946, the three heroes were brought before an officer in the Red Fort for passing of the sentence. The whole country waited with bated breath. Would there be riots or rejoicing. The three INA officers held their breath. The sentence was pronounced. It was the same for all three. It was:-

- (a) Cashiering (dismissal from service with disgrace)
- (b) Forfeiture of pay and allowances
- (c) Transportation for life

The last of the above punishments having been remitted by the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C), the three officers were free to go.¹ It took a few seconds for the words to sink in. The three of them filed out and went to Asaf Ali's house. The correspondent of The Hindu had already reached there. The news spread like wildfire in Delhi and thence to the rest of the country. There was widespread jubilation. Netaji's dream had been realised. The INA had taken Delhi and the country by storm, though not quite in the way he had visualised. The next day a rally was organized, which was presided over by Asaf Ali. More than a hundred thousand people came. They shouted Azad Hind Fauj (Netaji's name for the INA) *zindabad*.

The story of the INA began some four years earlier. It is a matter of shame that the post-Independence generation knows so little about the INA. Lieutenant General Sinha has made a timely statement about the need for research into the impact of the Indian Army on India's Freedom Struggle.² And no account of the Indian Army's role would be complete without the story of the INA's role. Due to censorship, very few people knew about the INA and its stirring deeds. The Red Fort trials changed all that. Because of this, these trials will be dealt with in some detail later on. This was indeed an epoch making event, which marked a turning point.

Birth of INA

The Indian Army found itself in a peculiar situation at the outbreak of World War II. The composition of the rank and file was fully Indian, but that of the officers was totally different. There were some Indian officers at the junior level, a few at the middle level and none at the senior level, all of whom were British. Yet the Indian Army acquitted itself gloriously. So what were they fighting for with such valour? Not to uphold the interests of the British Empire or India. The soldiers fought and died for the honour and glory of their regiments. Upholding the proud regimental tradition, of bravery and courage in battle, became the paramount issue. When the same army became India's army after Independence, its earlier oath of allegiance to the King was not held against it and rightly so.

The INA, on the other hand, was different from its very inception. Its composition, both rank and file and officers, was totally Indian and its purpose was to make India independent. Yet the Indian Army prisoners of war, who renounced their allegiance to the King upon joining the INA, were declared renegades even by the Indian Prime Minister after Independence. We shall come to that issue later. First things first. By the end of 1941, India had started featuring prominently in the Japanese policies. An organisation was set up by the Japanese Government, headed by Major Fujiwara Iwaichi. His initial contact was with Giani Pritam Singh, and after the Malayan invasion, with Captain Mohan Singh. Between the three of them, they started recruiting from amongst those captured by the Japanese in Malaya prior to the fall of Singapore. Thus was born the nucleus of what later came to be known as the INA.

Mohan Singh reasoned that, if the Japanese could be persuaded to make the INA a part of their invading force, the INA would overcome the British and topple the Raj. To accomplish this, men were needed desperately. They had to be induced to join and fast. Mohan Singh was not particular about how this was done. Consequently many events took place, which would threaten the INA's good name. The British exaggerated instances of ill treatment into gross atrocities, but could not substantiate them at the Red Fort trials. The INA under Mohan Singh never really got going. He had neither the stature nor the qualities of leadership necessary. By late 1942 disillusionment set in and Indian volunteers felt like pawns in the hands of the Japanese. In December 1942 Captain Mohan Singh ordered the INA to disband. He was arrested and exiled to Pulan Ubin. Rash Behari Bose tried to keep the India Independence League (IIL) and the INA going but with little success. Netaji's appearance changed all that. He took everyone by storm. No cases of ill treatment were reported thereafter. Even at the Red Fort trials none was even alleged. In fact there was no lack of volunteers.³

Netaji's stirring speech on 5 July 1943 at Singapore on assuming charge of IIL from Rash Behari Bose, reignited the flame of liberation of the motherland from the British. Netaji told the INA men that Gandhiji had paved the way by making Indians conscious of their bondage. Armed struggle was the next necessary stage and it was upto them to take it.⁴

His impact was significant and immediate. A new life had been infused in the INA. Besides the prisoners of war, local civilians with no military experience, from barristers to plantation workers, joined the INA and doubled its troop

strength. An Officers Training School for INA officers and the Azad School for civilian volunteers was set up. A group of 45 young Indians, personally chosen by Netaji (known as Tokyo Boys) was sent to Japan's Imperial Military Academy to train as fighter pilots and army officers. For the first time, outside the USSR, a women's regiment, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment under Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan was raised as a combat force. Dr Lakshmi Swaminathan (as she was then) gave up a prosperous practice as a gynaecologist in Singapore, to join the INA. The clarion call of INA was '*Jai Hind*' and '*Chalo Delhi*'.

What sort of a man was this, who could overnight transform a listless band of soldiers into a feared fighting force?

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose as a Man

If one looks at the history of the Indian Freedom Movement, after Mahatma Gandhi, the name that stands out is of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. His contribution is no less than that of Mahatma Gandhi and much more than Jawaharlal Nehru, who have been given much of the credit for the successful culmination of India's freedom struggle.

The British rulers acknowledged, with serious concern, Netaji as the most dynamic and influential political leader in all sections and religious groups of the country. They saw how Netaji's ideas always inspired young idealists to fight more strongly for freedom and saw in this firebrand charismatic leader a fearsome adversary. Netaji's popularity cut across religious lines. Muslims acknowledged and appreciated the leading role played by Netaji. Even Mohamed Ali Jinnah, who is acknowledged by all as the Father of Pakistan, had so much trust and regard for Netaji that he was willing to give up his idea of a religiously divided India, if Netaji led the nation. Muslim leaders of India's eastern states echoed the same sentiment during the thirties.⁵

Subhas Chandra Bose was born on 23 January 1897 to Srimati Prabhavati Devi and Janakinath Bose, a prominent advocate of Cuttack, who later became a member of the Bengal Legislative Council. He was later awarded the title of Rai Bahadur by the British. but on account of the anti-Indian policies of the British rulers, Janakinath returned the title and also resigned from the post of Public Prosecutor.

Subhas was the ninth among fourteen siblings and was a brilliant scholar. In 1920 he passed the Indian Civil Service (ICS) examination and joined the Cambridge University, obtaining his Tripos in 1921. He joined the ICS but resigned and returned to India, being deeply disturbed by Jallianwala Bagh massacre. He met Mahatma Gandhi and on his advice, met Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das, who remained his political Guru till he passed away in 1925.⁶ When CR Das was Mayor of Calcutta, Netaji was his CEO. His nationalist fervour drew the wrath of the British and he was arrested and deported to Mandalay, Burma. He was released in 1927 and in 1929 he was elected as President of All India Trade Union Congress. In 1930 he was elected Mayor of Calcutta. He greatly admired Gandhiji and took part in Salt Satyagraha and was arrested. After his release, he publicly denounced the Gandhi-Irwin pact and was arrested again. He was released on health grounds and went to Europe for treatment. He established contacts with various European nations to elicit their sympathy and support for India's freedom struggle. He met Mussolini in Italy, Felder in Germany, De Valera in Ireland and Romain Rolland in France. Netaji returned to India defying Government orders prohibiting his entry and was arrested. He was released on account of the overwhelming victory of the Congress in the 1937 elections. In 1938, at Haripura Congress Session, he was elected as President of the Indian National Congress and re-elected in 1939. He brought a resolution to give six months time to the British to hand over India to the Indians, or face a revolt. This was strongly opposed by Gandhiji.⁷

The result was that Netaji resigned within a few months and formed a progressive group known as the Forward Bloc within Congress. The peaceful passive non-cooperation movement of Gandhiji and of Congress was not for him. At this point of time the British perceived Netaji as a bigger threat than Gandhiji.

The Initial Years

In September 1939 World War II broke out and, as apprehended by Netaji, India was declared as a warring state by the Viceroy, without consulting the Indian leaders. Congress government in seven major states resigned in protest. Netaji now started a mass movement against using India's resources and men. To him it made no sense to make Indians shed their blood for the sake of colonial nations. There was a tremendous response to his call and the British promptly imprisoned him. He went on hunger strike and on the 11th day, after his health deteriorated, he was released from prison and put under house arrest. The British were afraid that there would be violent reactions all over the country should something happen to Netaji in prison. Because of his outspoken anti-British stance, he was jailed 11 times between 1920 and 1941 for periods varying between six months and three years. By this time it had become increasingly clear to him that he could not achieve anything worthwhile by remaining in India. That would bring him in direct confrontation with Gandhiji whom he loved and greatly admired. It would suit the British and harm India's cause for freedom. On 17 Jan 1941, he disappeared from house arrest. His nephew, Sisir Bose, drove him out of Calcutta in great secrecy. His last message from the soil of India said, "To my countrymen, I say. Forget not, the greatest curse for a man is to remain a slave. Forget not that the grossest crime is to compromise with injustice and wrong. Remember that the highest tribute is to battle against inequity, no matter what the cost may be."⁸

Thus began a hazardous and arduous journey by foot, train and car to Kabul, with the support of Kirti Party affiliated to the Communist Party of India. His plan was to travel to Russia and enlist Stalin's help to drive out the British from India, but unknown to Netaji, the British had secretly entered into a strategic non-aggression pact with Russia. As a result the Russian Embassy at Kabul gave a cold shoulder to Netaji but he still decided to try to enlist Russian help. Netaji's journey from Peshawar to Kabul was an epic in itself. Only his iron will and the burning desire to free India from foreign rule, enabled him to endure the rugged mountainous route, great risks of capture and freezing weather. Disappointed with lack of response from Stalin, Netaji decided to leave for Berlin. Although, he despised Nazism, he was prepared to make friends with the devil if that would help his cause. In the end Netaji obtained the release of all Indian prisoners from prisoners of war camps and started the Free India Centre, Azad Hind Radio Centre in Oct 1941 and finally the Indian Legion (Azad Hind Fauj), comprising enthusiastic Indian students, political activists and Indian prisoners captured by Rommel from various battles in Africa.⁹

Netaji met Hitler on 26 May 1942 to plead the urgency of his case. The latter, preoccupied by the German offensive towards Leningrad, was a little hesitant. In the meanwhile, Japanese forces had gained control over the entire area from the Sea of Japan to Bay of Bengal. By May 1942, Hongkong, Singapore, Manila, Penang and Rangoon had fallen to the Japanese. Another Indian revolutionary, Rash Behari Bose persuaded and obtained from the Japanese government, wholehearted support for the fight against the British Raj. Netaji, who was still trying to persuade Hitler to support an Indian government in exile, was greatly encouraged by the latest development in Japan. German motives and intentions with relation to India were complex. While the German foreign office wanted to support the Indian revolutionary, Hitler's personal belief was that the Aryan British had the right to rule over the unfit Indian masses.

Contacts with the Japanese

The developments in Japan convinced Netaji that he could play a much more active role from the soil of Asia rather than spending agonizingly prolonged periods staying in Berlin. Time was running out. He had to be where the action was. He was able to convince Germany and Italy to help him reach Japan. After long and complicated discussions with Italian and the Japanese Embassies in Berlin and Rome, and German authorities on the night of

7 February 1943, Netaji, accompanied by Abid Hassan, was taken by a German submarine by way of the English Channel, Bay of Biscay, West Africa, around South Africa to the South of Madagascar, where he was transferred to a Japanese submarine on 28 April 43, which took him to Saban after another epic journey. On 6 May 1943 they landed at Saban, and were welcomed by Yamamoto, the Japanese Military Attache at Berlin Embassy, who had reached earlier. Finally on 16 May 1943 Netaji reached Tokyo. Thus the stage was set for Netaji to emerge as the leader of the Independence movement in East Asia. He met Prime Minister Tojo on 10 June 1943. In *The Springing Tiger* (p177-178), Hugh Toye observed "For most the personality of the man was overwhelming, there was great genius of enthusiasm, of inspiration. Men found that when they were with him only the cause mattered, they saw only through his eyes, through the thoughts he gave them, could deny him nothing". Tojo was no exception. He was charmed as Netaji stood before him and spoke of his iron will and determination to secure India's Independence from the British. He saw fire in the man's belly, hunger for freedom in his eye and nothing in his words but great devotion to his Motherland.¹⁰

Domestic Scene of 1942

Meanwhile in India, following the failure of the Cripps mission, Congress became increasingly impatient and was not prepared to wait till the end of the war for Independence. Jayprakash Narain openly supported Netaji's armed revolution. Gandhiji's views were unconsciously affected by the resourcefulness displayed by Netaji. Netaji's cry, "Quit India" became his slogan. On 7 August 1942, AICC met in Bombay (now Mumbai). Most uncharacteristically, Gandhiji told the members, "We shall get our freedom by fighting. It cannot fall from the skies". On 8 August 1942, the resolution was passed by an overwhelming majority. The next day, the British government struck. The Congress High Command was arrested and sent off to jails in different parts of India. There were mass arrests all over the country. Gandhiji declared that Indians must do what they must do. He would not stand in their way. With the leaders behind bars, the Freedom Movement passed into the hands of ordinary people all over India. Gandhiji's non-violent tactics lasted barely two months before being swept away by the tide of violence of individuals and mobs. This was the last show of Gandhiji's non-violent mass *satyagraha* movement. Government had expected a non-violent response but scale and intensity of the violent response took it by surprise.¹¹ Whole lengths of railway lines were torn up. Telegraph wires were cut and poles pulled up and the Government stores and post offices were damaged. The Government used all its might, including the Armed Forces and strafing from the air to put down the rebellion of 1942. Stray cases continued right through 1943. Daily night broadcasts by Netaji helped to stoke the fire. He asked people to listen to the BBC broadcasts about Colonel Britton, beamed to occupied Europe, and use the same tactics for sabotage. Two organisations did not take part in the uprising. They were the Communist Party of India (out of sympathy for the Soviet Union who had joined the Allies) and the Muslim League.

Netaji Assumes Command of INA

To come back to Netaji. In Tokyo Netaji met Prime Minister General Tojo again on 14 June 1943, who agreed to extend every possible support for the cause of Indian Independence. He then left for Singapore. When he arrived on 2 July, he received a tumultuous welcome there from soldiers and civilians alike. On 4 July 1943, a reception was held in his honour, during which Rash Behari Bose transferred the mantle of the Indian Independence League to Netaji. On 25 August 1943, he was formally appointed the Commander-in- Chief of the INA. On 23 October 1943, Japan announced its official recognition of the Provisional Government of India under Subhas Chandra Bose. Recognition from Germany followed on 29 October 1943 and from Italy on 9 November 1943.

INA in Operations

The preparation for assault moved at a fast pace and the INA HQ was moved from Singapore to Rangoon on 7 January 1944. It was decided *inter alia* that the only flag to fly over the Indian soil would be the National Tricolour. The first success of INA came in Arakan's Maya Valley by Major LS Misra's unit against the 7 Indian Division. Success stories continued and caused Mountbatten grave concern. Under his directions the 3rd Indian Division facing the INA at Imphal remained Indian in name only. Twenty four of its battalions had English, Nigerian and Burmese soldiers, because he feared that Indian soldiers would join the INA. I do not intend to go into the details of the military operations of the INA, only some salient points are mentioned to analyse its impact.

The combat achievements of the INA were less than anticipated, dependent as they were on Japanese support of arms, ammunition, equipment and logistics and the failure of the Japanese Army to take Imphal. But, what they had achieved within these limitations, in Arakan and Manipur Basin, fired the imagination of Indians. More importantly, the INA shook the faith of the British Raj in the Indian Army's loyalty to the British Crown.

The INA had been raised and trained as a guerrilla force. The whole point was to travel light, avoid positional warfare and frontal assaults, go deep behind the British lines and persuade men in the British Army to come over. INA's strategy was to start a revolution in India. Then the INA and revolutionaries would eject the British from India. Thus,

even if the Japanese lost and the British won the war, they would not be able to come back. Shorn of their sword arm – the Indian Army, the British would be incapable of reconquering India.

The plan was that the Japanese, possessing heavier weapons, should break the outer defences of India at the Imphal Basin and then allow the INA 1st Division to pass through and spread out for guerilla operations. It was up to the Japanese to take Imphal. INA was not meant to be used as a fighting force prior to the capture of Imphal. Sustained fighting even on the battlefield's margin, was not what they had been trained for and they hadn't the necessary means. As the British Intelligence observed "It is the Japanese Army, which failed the INA". By failing to reach its objectives, the Japanese prevented the INA from being used in the role for which it was designed. Whenever combat opportunities presented themselves, the INA acquitted itself creditably. In the battle for Imphal, Colonel Shaukat Malik's force captured Moiriang in the Manipur Basin and for some time a few square miles of Indian territory came under the provisional Azad Hind Government. They certainly did not deserve derogatory comments one reads in popular accounts of the Burma Campaign and in the memoirs of senior serving British officers like Field Marshall Sir William Slim and Lieutenant General Sir Francis Tuker, the latter's account is not even firsthand (he was then serving in North Africa).

The spirit of the INA is typified by the following account. When Colonel Sahgal and his men were captured, the then Major General Douglas Gracey, GOC 20 Division, asked him, "What did you people mean, by going on fighting? We had artillery, armour. You chaps had nothing. But instead of surrendering, you fought on. It was madness. Why did you do it? Why didn't you come over?" Colonel Sahgal replied that of course it was madness. A revolutionary army lives on the spirit of madness. How else could they have carried on against the numbers and weapons of the British Indian Army. (After Independence General Douglas Gracey became the Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army).¹²

The Closing Stages

The siege of Imphal was to be the turning point in the saga of the INA. It was not the British army, but monsoon, which became the biggest adversary. Logistics became the major problem as American B 29 bombers disrupted the lines of supply. Outbreak of malaria and dysentery in the face of lack of medical facilities and supplies took a heavy toll. Netaji was forced by circumstances to issue instructions to INA to withdraw. The losses during the long withdrawal were significant and had a serious impact on the INA. Netaji did not give up and the task of rebuilding the INA continued in Burma. They continued to provide stiff resistance to the Allied advance, but the tide turned inexorably. On the Western front on 6 June 1944, Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy and the thrust towards Berlin began, just as the thrust towards Rangoon had already started on the Eastern front. On 7 May 1945, Germany formally surrendered following the death of Hitler. Japan continued, but it was a losing battle. On 7 August 1945, the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima followed by the second bomb on 9 August 1945 on Nagasaki. Inevitably Japan surrendered. Netaji announced in his calm voice, "Japan's surrender is not India's surrender..... The INA would not admit defeat". Netaji wanted to stay on in Singapore but under extreme pressure from his cabinet colleagues, decided to leave. He travelled to Saigon and from there to Taiwan and then he disappeared. Nobody believed the story that he died in an air crash. The remnants of the INA were to surrender when the Allied forces captured Burma. A battle had been fought and lost in the jungles of Burma. But the campaign was not over. It went on in the hearts and minds of the people.

Netaji as a Military Leader

Netaji had no military training but could grasp the essentials of strategy and man management with ease. Wisely, he left operational matters to his senior officers. He wore military uniform, but never did he give himself any military rank. The amity between Hindus and Muslims in the INA was exemplary. He believed in action and not in speeches, as most other leaders.¹³ He was endowed with great physical, mental and spiritual powers. But he never revealed his spiritual powers to anyone.

INA Trials Begin

As the veil of censorship lifted because of the dispatches by war correspondents accompanying the 14th Army during re-conquest of Burma in 1943, INA's deeds became known to more and more people. Since the existence of the INA and its exploits could no longer be hidden, British Intelligence set out to blacken the image of the INA. Viceroy Wavell always referred to the INA as a bunch of cowards and weaklings, and brutality was the stock in the trade of the committed INA man or JIFF (Japanese-Indian Fifth Column) as they were named by the British. Both Wavell and Field Marshall Auchinleck, now C-in-C of the Army in India, were disappointed men: professional soldiers, who had been removed from command due to whims and fancies of Churchill. It was worse for Wavell, for he had been kicked upstairs and made Viceroy, a post so far held by civilians. Auchinleck firmly believed that a soldier must remain true to his oath, even if the oath of allegiance was to the King of another country and there had been no choice, in any case. Therefore, there had to be trials. This was notified by a press communiqué on 27 August 1945. The leading figures in the INA would be brought before Court Martial for all Indians to see that they were "Part traitor, part coward, part bully and a lackey in the service of Nippon." This was a grave miscalculation, which had far-reaching ramifications. Auchinleck kept assuring Wavell that there were some very ugly cases of torture of loyal soldiers by the "renegades" as he termed the INA. Wavell also felt that the Court Martials of the INA officers would shock the people. Even more than Wavell, Auchinleck was confident that when the evidence of brutality was made public, the sympathy for the INA would evaporate. The trials were going to be open to public for this reason. People would find it difficult to support murderers and torturers of their own race simply because they remained loyal to their country. Grim and lurid stories of injury and death were constructed from interrogation of defectors and escapees to the Indian Headquarters and broadcast over All India Radio.

When the Congress leaders were released on 15 June 1945, the political scenario had undergone a sea change. They knew nothing about the INA and its daring deeds under the dynamic leadership of Netaji. In reply to a question after his release, Nehru said that he would fight Netaji if he tried leading Indians against India, side by side with the Japanese. On 26 July 1945, Churchill lost the general elections and Clement Attlee became the prime minister. By this time the Congress leaders had come to know about Netaji and his INA. Both Congress leadership and the British were faced with a dilemma. What should be done with Netaji, should he be captured and brought to India? He had organised

India's first National Army and so conducted himself that the Japanese had been forced to treat Indians as allies. In the eyes of the masses he stood at par with Gandhiji. If he came back, the Netaji wave would sweep away the Congress leadership. Then came the sudden end to World War II. Japan capitulated on 15 August 1946 after two atom bombs had been dropped and on 23 August 1945 came the announcement that Netaji had died in an air crash. Netaji's "death" solved the dilemma for both the British and the Congress leadership. He was no longer a "loose cannon". He was a martyr, who had led an army of freedom fighters. The Congress leadership were quick to realise the political mileage they would achieve by lionising the INA, at least for the time being.

British Dilemma for Trials

The British were faced with another kind of problem. They realised the influence of the returning INA men from PW camps. In taking the decision to hold courts martials, they forgot that there was a wide gulf in the perceptions between the British and the Indian public. In addition to the INA men, known officially as '*Jiffs*', there were also the '*Hifs*', the Indian prisoners of war, who had fought alongside the Germans and Italians. They would be collectively classified as White, Grey and Black. Those considered "untainted" were classified as White and were to be treated as ordinary PWs. Those, against whom there were doubts regarding their loyalty and morale, were classified as Grey. They were to be watched. If upgraded to White, they would be retained in Service. Dark Greys would be put under surveillance. Those not upgraded would be discharged. Those who were to be tried were classified as Blacks. They were those who were supposed to have committed military offences. Although Auchinleck was firm on proceeding against the Blacks, the growing public opinion forced him to make a number of mid-course corrections. On 22 June 1945, C-in-C decided to proceed against triable Blacks. The number was estimated to be 350. Besides these, there were 2200 Blacks and 4800 Dark Greys to be held in detention. A fortnight later the number of triable Blacks was raised to 1000 and further raised to 2000 when the whole INA surrendered. On 11 August 1945, the Secretary of State was informed that approximately 600 would face trials and the rest of the Blacks and Dark Greys would be dismissed. The estimate of probable death sentences was 50. By this time the INA had caught the imagination of the Indian public and the immense publicity was having repercussions on the political climate in India. Keeping this situation in mind the C-in-C decided on 20 September 1945 that death penalty would be imposed only on those Blacks, who were proved guilty of putting countrymen to death or torturing them. On 20 October 1945, he further reduced the trial categories. The trials would not be on the basis of waging war against the King, but on charges of brutalities.¹⁴

The Trials

The first to be tried were Colonel (Captain) Shah Nawaz, Colonel (Captain) PK Sahgal and Colonel (Lieutenant) GS Dhillon. The ranks within brackets are their ranks at the time of capture by the Japanese. This trial was indeed the turning point. The single most important event, which would prove to be a triumph for the INA and disaster for the British. It is from here that the tide turned inexorably against the latter.

The Congress took upon themselves the entire responsibility of arranging the defence of the accused persons. To do this they assembled the greatest ever galaxy of legal luminaries. The INA Defence Committee comprised of Kailash Nath Katju, Asaf Ali, Rai Bahadur Badri Das, Raghunandan Saran, Tej Bhadur Sapru, Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhulabhai Desai.¹⁵ The actual task of assembling them and assigning duties was done quietly, behind the scene, by Justice Achhru Ram, the father of Colonel PK Sahgal. It is he who decided that Bhulabhai Desai would defend the three officers in the Court. Tej Bahadur Sapru, the senior defence counsel would make a token appearance and withdraw. Bhulabhai would then take over for no one could match him in court room advocacy.

The first trial opened on 5 November 1945. After a few adjournments the trial resumed on 7 December 1945. Meanwhile on 30 November 1945 the Governor General decided to release as quickly as possible the Blacks, who were not to be brought to trial, sensing the growing popular excitement and tumult. When the trial reopened on 7 December 1945, things went wrong for the Prosecution from the start. What defeated the Government of India's attempt to disparage the reputation of the INA, was the direction the proceedings actually took. Nowhere in the opening address of Sir Naushirwan P Engineer, Advocate General of India and chief counsel for the prosecution or throughout his closing address, was there any convincing substantiation of the charge of torture forthcoming. Bhulabhai Desai asked for evidence. When two officers, Dhargalkar and Badhwar, both of 3 Cavalry were produced as witnesses, it came out that the mistreatment was at the hands of the Japanese and not fellow Indians. Similarly, much was made of the mistreatment of Durrani of the Bahawalpur Infantry, but it turned out that his case had nothing to do with how men entered the INA, but for suborning the men who had.

The tone was set by the first prosecution witness, who did the maximum damage. He was a certain DC Nag, an ex-magistrate, who had joined the Adjutant General's Branch of the Indian Army and had been taken a prisoner at Singapore. He was well conversant with all parts of Netaji's enterprise. Under cross examination, he identified some 70 documents and suddenly the INA began to be credible. It came out as a well-organised, efficiently administered and ably led Army. Now for the first time the INA's performance in field became known. All this was lapped up by the National Dailies. The stories of the deeds of the INA that came out during the trial were perceived as so inflammatory that the British Government forbade the BBC from broadcasting their story. For the first time light was shed on the reality of the INA. They were not dupes, weaklings, cowards and bullies that the Government had portrayed them to be. They were just plain fighting soldiers. A string of witnesses narrated their tales of ill treatment, but the curious thing was that they had nothing to do with the three accused officers on trial. Bhulabhai Desai charged that this was done to create a prejudice against honourable men. He decided against calling more than 11 witnesses, because the 28 prosecution witnesses had made statements, which supported his case equally well. Again and again, the court and the audience heard them say things that helped rather than damage the defendant's case, like Dilasa Khan. He remembered Shah Nawaz telling his men that if they saw a Japanese soldier mistreating Indian women, he would be told to stop. If he did not, they were at liberty to use force to stop him and even shoot him, if necessary. This is not what prosecution wanted him to say, but once on the stand, he could not be silenced. And the public grew more and more excited. India was aflame. Never had a matter so stirred the public. This is not what Auchinleck had bargained for. It was indeed a triumph for the INA. We have already seen what the verdict was.

Two more trials had opened, but these were shifted to Delhi cantonment. All subsequent trials opened there. Seeing that the charge of treason was inflaming public opinion, Auchinleck had already instructed the Adjutant General to bring in charges of brutalities only.

The Aftermath of Trials

Early in May 1946 a terse press communiqué announced that there would be no more trials. At about the same time the last of the detained INA men were released. One thing that stands out, from the point of view of the then Government of India, is that the trial was a first class blunder. Nobody is quite sure as to how many trials actually took place. "History of the INA" states that by the end of March 1946, only 27 trials had been instituted or were under consideration. Fay says his private count is only ten actual trials held.

The INA and the trials gave a powerful and decisive message to the British that it was time for them to leave. The Viceroy warned the British Government that for the first time there were signs of a demoralising effect not only among the civil services, but also in the Indian Army. On 4 December 1946, a delegation of British MPs was dispatched to India to tell the people that India would be given Independence "speedily". Signs of unrest were there for all to see. Before the Red Fort trials began, Auchinleck had informed the Government that his Indian Battalions would be able to contain the uprising. By the end of the trials, his confidence was seriously shaken. Shah Nawaz, Prem Sahgal and Gurbaksh Dhillon were heroes in the eyes of the masses. Calling them traitors simply increased their popularity. Another miscalculation was the feeling that one million Indian Army jawans, scheduled for demobilisation, would drown the twenty thousand INA men, who were to be released, so there was nothing for British to worry about. The opposite happened. The growth of nationalist feeling generated by the trials affected the Armed Forces as well.¹⁶ Auchinleck now set-up a special team in the Army HQ with the sole purpose of finding out the real feelings of the Indian soldier. There was a grave doubt whether the Indian Army could be used to suppress a rebellion. Auchinleck noted for the first time that the use of Indian divisions to help the Dutch to recover Java was widely unpopular.

Regarding the remission of sentence of Shah Nawaz, Sahgal and Dhillon, Auchinleck explained in a letter to all senior British officers that any attempt to enforce the sentence would have led to chaos in the country at large and probably to mutiny and dissension in the Army, culminating in its dissolution. The Indian Army, for long the sword arm of the Raj, had now become a double edged weapon ready to decimate the wielder. The study that Auchinleck had ordered made it clear that the Indian Army could not be used against Indians. This was perhaps the report that Lieutenant General Sinha mentions in his article. In the autumn and winter of 1945-46, a conflagration of excitement and indignation, lit by Netaji and his INA swept through the Country. The Indian officers and the Jawan were also equally affected. It was the INA that forced Britain's hand. Sufficient number of British battalions were not available and the battle-weary British troops wanted to go home. And as Colonel Sahgal said, without Netaji INA would have been nothing. Bereft of its main weapon, Britain realised that its position in India had become untenable, that it would be better to withdraw or it would be run over. The shift of allegiance of the Indian Army was bound to happen. All it needed was a shot in the arm and that came in the form of the INA.

Concluding Remarks

There are two misconceptions still prevalent: one that Gandhiji was solely responsible for India achieving Independence and the other that it was achieved by peaceful means. Gandhiji's peaceful means in its effective form, lasted barely two months and we had to wait for another five years to attain freedom.¹⁷ The stirring deeds of the INA caught the imagination of all Indians and the fire of patriotism burned brighter than ever before and found expression in the mutiny in the Indian Navy in Bombay in 1946. Professor Hazara Singh has stated, "Even in its defeat, the INA had been successful in ringing the death knell of Colonialism".¹⁸

The Naval mutiny in Bombay in 1946 was followed by another among the ground crew in the Royal Indian Air Force. An Army mutiny broke out at Jabalpur during the last week of February 1946, which had to be put down with difficulty. The weekly intelligence summary of 25 March 1946 admitted that the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force units could not be relied upon to put down mass revolt. Thus, what Netaji and the INA failed to achieve directly, they succeeded in achieving posthumously. The trials were carried out in the Red Fort, New Delhi, thus ironically enabling the INA remnants to achieve Netaji's War Cry, "*Chalo Delhi*." The British saw the writing on the wall. When historian Dr Mazumdar spoke to the prime minister of Britain, Lord Clement Attlee on his decision to grant Independence to India; the latter cited among several reasons, the principle reason was erosion of loyalty to the British Crown among the Indian Army as a result of the military activities of Netaji.¹⁹ Make no mistake, India's achieving Independence was no benign 'transfer of power'. Power was wrested from the British, as is clear from Clement Attlee's statement. And it was the Indian National Army that forced Britain's hand.

Congress leaders, particularly Nehru, soon changed their stance in relation to the INA. Their purpose of squeezing the maximum political advantage from championing the INA had been achieved. Congress leaders were now kind but patronising. Soon they would be indifferent. The INA officers would not be asked to re-enter the Indian Army. It was no longer necessary to hail the defendants of the Red Fort trials and make much of the INA. They had served their purpose.

On 22 May 1946, Gandhiji addressed the INA officers.²⁰ He said, "Your object, as I have been told, was only to free India, never to help the Japanese. You failed in your direct objective, i.e. to defeat the British. But you have the satisfaction that the whole Country has been roused and even regular forces have been stirred into a new political consciousness and have begun to think in terms of Independence. You have achieved a complete unity among the Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, Anglo-Indians and Sikhs in your ranks. That is no mean achievement." So far so good. He then went on to say, "Above all, you must never beg or throw yourselves on anybody's charity. Because you have risked your lives for India's sake and fought for her on the Imphal plains, you must not expect to be pampered in return."

And why not, one may be tempted to ask. Any other country would have "pampered" them. In any case, the INA

never wanted anything in return except recognition. Even that was not forthcoming. Nehru, the first Prime Minister of Independent India firmly believed that the INA had laboured, mistakenly, for India's freedom. Their purpose having been served, Nehru simply archived them and there they remain, like faded photographs in an old family album.

Endnotes

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18. "Bose Hastened India's Freedom" by Prof Hazara Singh
19. "Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Indian Independence" by Narasinha Kamath (Last para)
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