

Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army: A Southeast Asian Perspective

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Abstract

The paper comments on the twin phenomena of Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army (INA) in the psyche of Indians in Southeast Asia. While Indians in Southeast Asia contributed large numbers of women and men, materials and money to the INA, the personality of Bose and the institutional experience of INA revitalized and affected their psyche in a way that brought new awakenings within them. This paper highlights the lacuna of research that waits to be conducted and documented on the effects of Netaji and INA in the lives of Indians in Southeast Asia. The paper examines some of the institutional consequences by commenting upon the roles played by individuals involved in the INA in the post-war years.

Keywords: Indians, Southeast Asia, Indian National Army, Second World War.

Introduction¹

Most academic publications on Subhas Chandra Bose focus on themes such as his early revolutionary days in India, his alienation with the British rule, his journey to Germany and the secret pact with Hitler, his move to Southeast Asia and how he contributed to the raising of the Indian National Army (INA) to liberate India from British rule. While these themes are significant in terms of understanding the role of Bose as well as his ideas and how he sought to challenge the British, there are, however, not many academic publications on the impact of the INA and his leadership on Indians in Southeast Asia.

This brief paper seeks to provide a Southeast Asian perspective on the role of Bose and his leadership of the INA. In a more specific sense, it will provide an assessment of the INA's impact on the psyche of Indians in Southeast Asia and the consequences for organizations that Indians pursued after the Second World War.

Bose was not another leader in the broad Indian nationalist movement that sprung up before World War II, but a towering personality and a maverick who provided an alternative conception of Indian nationalism to that articulated by Gandhi and Nehru. In a more specific sense, while Gandhi sought to engage in civil disobedience

¹ The paper was presented at the Seminar on 'The Forgotten Army in a World war: Subhas Bose's INA and Asia's Independence' organized by the ISEAS and the India Club on 13 August 2006.

and limited cooperation with the British to gain independence, Bose felt that the only effective way to drive the British out of India was through physical means. It was on the matter of how to achieve India's independence that Bose disagreed sharply with Gandhi. Bose felt that he had to seek the alliance of the forces opposed to Britain, build up a truly Indian army and eventually mobilize Indians to expel Britain out of India. When India achieved its independence in 1947, little credit was given the contributions of Bose and his Indian National Army, but as more evidence began to gather, it became clear that without the heroic sacrifice of thousands of Indians in the service of the INA, India's independence could have been delayed. Britain quickened the pace of independence for India not so much because of Gandhi's civil disobedience movement but because of the impact the INA had on the psyche of British India's armed forces. When Atlee was asked about Gandhi's influence in the decision to grant independence to India, he remarked "minimal".

It must be remembered that after Bose took over the leadership of the INA from Rash Behari Bose, the support for the INA was overwhelming from Indians in places like Malaya, Singapore, Burma, Thailand, and Vietnam and indeed from Indians throughout the East Asian region. Bose's revival of the INA, his phenomenal oratorical skills, his commitment and dedication to the cause of India's independence, his unshakeable belief that Britain had to be driven out of India for the achievement of any meaningful independence, and his prestige in the eyes of the Japanese leadership galvanized Indians in the region of East and Southeast Asia to support the INA and Bose's leadership.

Effects on Individuals

Despite the suffering of Indians in India during the British Raj, it was in migrating to Southeast Asia that Indians began to feel a sense of belonging to one group of people, due to the efforts of colonial governments to categorize Indians into various sub-categories as well as by race. This was clearly evident in those parts of Southeast Asia in which the British directly used Indian labor and resources to further their economic and political ambitions. Thus Indians were not only conceived of as from British India but also as belonging to different groups and categories which allowed the colonial governments to better control them. Thus Sikhs and Pathans formed the soldiers, with Sikhs, Tamils and others in the police force. The most productive elements among the Indian migrants, as well as the most exploited, were the laboring masses from the Madras Presidency, who spoke Tamil but were illiterate. To control them were the Tamil-knowing, but English-speaking, clerks whose mother tongue was Malayalam. The Ceylon Tamils, though Tamil-speaking, formed a class by themselves by working in the white collar administrative service below the British civil administration. With these came the financial and commercial caste groups of Madras and Bombay Presidencies. The siphoning of commission from the trade of rubber and tin from its production in Malaya to its eventual accounting in London left the mass of Indians in constant poverty. A migrant from Ramanadapuram district recollects the sight of the masses in 1930s Kuala Pillah as follows:

There were nice houses; there were good roads; people were selling cooked food by carrying on their shoulders and used chopped sticks to eat them. This

was different from home..... But the people who cut grass, those who cleaned the streets, those who were paving the streets with stones and pouring tar over them were all Tamils..... The rubber trees were planted in neat rows and looked beautiful to look at. But those who worked there did not wear good clothes, and their lifestyle was pathetic. They wore dirty clothes; their living quarters was full of smoke and dirty and they were located in places full of blood sucking parasites, mosquitoes, centipedes, and snakes. There were inadequate schools; the huts in which women left their children to go to work was extremely dirty, and even though there were clinics with nurses, there was always the shortage of medicine (Sutherland 1989: 17-19).

The arrival of the Japanese and later the formation of the Indian Independence League (IIL) were to change the perceptions of many individuals. The colonial world was suddenly turned on its head. The British in Malaya and Burma, the Dutch in the East Indies, the French in Indo-China, and the Americans in the Philippines were no more the masters of Indians or other Southeast Asians. The Japanese superseded all of them and were willing to incorporate all those who were joining them. The IIL made Indians be viewed as friendly nationals by Japan, and they were subjected to less persecution than the ethnic Chinese all over Southeast Asia.

The war years would have been non-eventful, except for the shortages and suffering, if two significant phenomena did not affect the individual lives of Indians in Southeast Asia. These were the personality of Subhas Chandra Bose (also known as 'Netaji') and the Indian National Army (INA). A former INA soldier, V. Samy had this to say:

The arrival of Netaji Bose in Southeast Asia kindled a new spirit among all Indians who began to believe that India would be free soon. Netaji's call reached into the hearts and minds of all Indians. His call for total mobilization to free India generated a tremendous response (Netaji Centre 1992: 73).

There were some differences in the patterns of response in various areas of Southeast Asia. In the Dutch-ruled East Indies (Indonesia), for instance, different responses were observed in different parts of the colony. In Java, the arrival of the Japanese brought in its wake a recognition of the usefulness of forming the IIL for the protection of Indians. Caca Tejumal was the Indonesian representative. The Japanese treated the Indians well and volunteers for the INA were sent from Java (Interview with G.H.Sawlani, one of the volunteers. Mani 1993: 124). About 70 men (forty-five were Sindhis) left Java for Malaya. Caca Tejumal, as the Indonesian representative, brought forty of them to Singapore for officer training. Later in the war, the British arrested them at Moulmein and released them in 1946 at Calcutta to return to their villages. In North Sumatra, the response was different. The Japanese created a unit out of the British Indian soldiers they had sent to be interned at Medan. Using them, volunteers from the local Indian community, largely Tamil plantation and urban workers as well as Sikhs, were recruited to send to the war front for INA. As these volunteers were sent to Burma, few of them returned, while some of them stayed on in Malaya or Burma.

To the vast majority of Indians in the former British colonies of Malaya, Singapore and Burma, the arrival of Bose and the revitalization of the INA was

something beyond their wildest expectations. Joining the INA imbued them with a sense of tremendous pride and dignity. Oppressed and exploited by British employers and administrators for many years, joining the INA meant getting even with them. Prompted by the appeal by Bose for total mobilization, Indians in Southeast Asia contributed generously towards the war efforts of the INA. Those who could not join the fighting formation of the INA contributed by raising funds for the movement. Young women were recruited to form the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the women's military wing of the INA. Janaki Athi Nagappan, who was in the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, says:

The Rani of Jhansi Regiment underwent rigorous training. Recruits were fully aware of the hardships that awaited them in the battlefield along the Indo-Burmese border. Our girls and women knew that in the battle, hunger, thirst, fatigue, bombing, injury and death would be constant companions. But they were inspired by the vision of a free India (Netaji Centre 1991: 43).

Netaji was a leader of immense popularity. His public addresses in the capitals of East Asia drew unimaginable crowds. Indians loved Netaji. For them he was a savior sent to redeem India from the clutches of the British imperialists. They were not only willing to join the INA but were ready to die for the cause of Mother India. Indians, Ceylonese, Muslims, Sinhalese and many other groups took part in the efforts of the INA.

In pre-war Indian homes, and even among residences occupied by single men, the walls of the house or rooms would be adorned by pictures of gods and beloved family members. To these were added pictures of Netaji in his military uniform. He received the flower garlands and the devout respect given to all other divine beings on the walls, even though he was still alive. Of course, there are many folk stories of how Japanese soldiers searching houses and seeing the picture of Netaji would salute the picture and leave the home. During the war, and for many years after the war, many households (like my mother's) would treasure the picture of Netaji as equally divine to all the Hindu gods and goddesses.

The psyche of laboring Indians, as well those in the British army regiments and those in white-collar colonial occupations and traders, was altered so that they too felt that they could bring down a mighty empire and be free. Many women, like my mother, told their children that if the short Japanese can defeat the white man, surely ordinary Indians (Tamils) too could fight and be free. Availability of coordinated training and the chance to learn the use of firearms made men, women and children feel that they were all dignified beings. Sons ran away from their homes and reported themselves as older than they really were in order to join the ranks of armed soldiers. Sankaran Somaiya reports his experience as follows:

After I heard the fiery speech of Netaji, I left the house of my maternal uncle at Naval Base. I went to Brasbasah Road football field, where they had an INA recruitment center. There were already many students and youths standing in line. One of the recruiting officers walked down the line and pointed to some of the youths to move and sit in another line. I joined a group of 150 youths seated in another area. We were told that we all looked young and that we must return home. Upon hearing this, we protested, but to no avail. We got angry and took all the tables and chairs in the area and started throwing at

the registration officer. The Japanese Military police turned up and arrested us and confined us in the neighbouring Jansi Rani regiment camp. Next morning Netaji came to the camp, and we started shouting "Nethajiku Jai! Ghandhijiku Jai!". He also advised us to go home as we all looked like school children. We insisted that we want to fight and die for India's freedom. After some time, we were all recruited to the Balak Sena, with some being sent to the Azad School to learn Japanese (Somaiah 1994: 51-52).

The zeal observed among women and children led to formation of more women's and children's sections. The training in these various sections was to have a lasting effect on the post-war social activities of participants.

The Second World War also emboldened many Indians to seek transition to other jobs. The Sikhs in Tanjung Priok harbour of Jakarta, for instance, who had been watchmen in the pre-war years, became contractors for the Japanese naval ships (Mani, 1993a: 105). Many watchmen used the war years to become employers and businessmen. Similarly, in North Sumatra, many Tamils were trained to become truck drivers and contractors during the war years (Mani 1993b: 59). While many Indians in Southeast Asia were dislodged from the colonial occupations which had disciplined them to a stratified community, association with IIL during the war years equipped them with a different mental outlook for the post-war years.

The war years also brought about a sense of Indian identity which was lacking before the declaration of IIL and INA. Indians in both organizations were involved for a single purpose – liberating India – that never existed before the war. This sense of unity of purpose cut across linguistic, regional, caste and religious divides among Indians. It may be said that this was the only time in the history of Indians in Southeast Asia that could be described as being pervaded by a sense of unity and purpose. This feeling would never occur again as the postwar years demanded Indians to be loyal to the nation states in which they found themselves.

Institutional Effects during the War Years

The mobilization for India's independence also had an impact on the Malay and Chinese nationalist groups in the country. Even a former leader of a Malay radical party had so much admiration for Bose that later he changed his name from Ahmad Sani to Ahmad Bostemam. Even the Malayan Communist Party that fought the Japanese in Malaya during the occupation years had no problems with the INA and its members. In fact, during the period of INA mobilization, the Malayan Communist Party established extensive contacts with members of the INA in the various camps. This became evident especially during the uncertain period of Japanese surrender awaiting the arrival of Allied troops. Sutherland (1991), in his memoirs, mentions how he was instructed to leave the INA camp and travel to another camp to establish links with communist leadership. Following the INA debacle at Imphal, Indians who trekked back into the country were contacted by the MCP and later recruited in many of the left-wing organizations to fight the British rule.

The nationalist appeal of Bose was total and overwhelming. Even those sub-communal groups like the Ceylonese and Muslims who had refused to partake in the activities changed their minds after listening to the appeals of Bose. The accusations that

INA used the Japanese secret police Kempeitai to neutralize dissident elements have not been verified on the basis of evidence. Nonetheless, the recruitment of Indians, mostly plantation workers, to work in the Siam Death Railway remains a sore point of the INA era in Malaysia era. About 130,000 Indians were recruited to work in the infamous Death Railway, and in the end less than half returned to Malaya. Thousands died of hunger, Malaria, snakebites and thirst.

For Indians in Southeast Asia, and Malaya and Singapore in particular, Bose's leadership of the INA was important in many respects. First, for a first time, Indians, despite being divided by sub-communal and religious divides, had a leader who could command their respect and loyalty. Second, Indians found in Bose a person with an utmost sense of dedication and commitment to the liberation of India through force. Third, for the thousands of ordinary Indian workers in Malaysia, Singapore and Burma, he provided a sense of hope.

Joining the INA brought immense benefits for Indians. First, participation in the efforts of the INA meant that the status of Indians was elevated from exploited workers to freedom fighters with honour and dignity. Second, participation meant that Indians were exposed to organizational experience, discipline and training in the handling of firearms. Third, it provided crucial leadership experience for selected number of Indians in instilling in their men with pride, guiding them towards a goal and more importantly working for the freedom of India. In short, INA elevated the status of thousands of men and women from laboring classes and low level service workers in Malaya to fight not just for the freedom of India but to get even with the former colonial power – a power that was responsible for reducing Indians to the position of beggars. Michael Stenson writes of the INA camps as “filled with a ferment of ideas deriving not merely from the teaching of nationalist and revolutionary history or the incalculations of anti-imperialist attitudes but also from the spontaneous exchange of views about all sorts of political ideas from Dravidianism to socialism and communism” (1980: 96-97).

Apart from the calls of nationalism, many Indian labourers joined the INA to escape the cruelty and harshness of the Japanese Occupation. Jain (1970) is of the opinion that Indian labour participated in the INA to escape from being forcibly recruited to work on the Death Railway project. Jain's reductionist understanding of the Indian labourers' support for the INA can be questioned. There are also others who have criticized those who joined the INA as volunteering to enjoy free food and shelter. Interviews with former members of the INA suggest that the support and enthusiasm for the INA was overwhelming not only from labourers but also from the clerical and middle class (Jayamani Subramaniam 1979; Sudarman 1989; Somaiya 1994).

According to Jayamani Subramaniam, Indian involvement in the INA was an act of revenge by Indian labour against the British for their exploitation and ill treatment. The defeat of the British by the Japanese was something welcomed by Indians. Just before the war, in the Klang district strikes, which received international attention, many Indian estate workers were killed and those arrested were deported to India. Despite appeals made by the Indian authorities, the British government delayed action on the pretext that they were preparing for the war. With the advance of the Japanese into Malaya, orders were given for the evacuation of all European civilians. Jayamani Subramaniam, who witnessed the evacuation European civilians, has this to say:

What I and my friends saw at Kuala Lumpur railway station cannot be erased from our memories. Thousands of British—men, women and children arrived

at the station. They all looked sad. The women especially were crying and trying to wipe their tears. Babies were crying for milk. These men and women who had received high salaries were now finding it hard to even obtain a piece of bread. When we gave them bread and cigarettes, they received them with much gratitude—as though they have never seen these things before. Even for a cup of coffee they would thank us many times. The sufferings and tears of Indian workers have now reduced the Europeans to mere beggars! (1979: 37-38).

From the above testimony, and the testimonies of others, both written and oral, the Indian community's participation in the independence movement appears to have been genuine.

The idea that the community was given an opportunity to play a role in the establishment of a free India captured their imagination. Despite the hardship and suffering endured by Indians during the occupation, the Japanese support of the INA enhanced the importance of the Indian community in Malaya. As one author has said: "Indians were elevated from being pariahs of British Malaya to a most favored community status under the Japanese" (Stenson 1980: 92). Indian involvement in the INA spared them from the worst forms of Japanese brutality. For example, when Macintyre, the Chairman of Batu Pahat League assaulted a Japanese official for his arrogance and for being rude, the Japanese let him off on the grounds that he was discharging his duties as a member of Azad Hind (the Provisional Government of India) (Ramasamy 2000: 99).

The activities of the INA provided an unprecedented sense of group and communal solidarity. Never before had the Indian community been so united in a single movement like the Indian Independence movement in Malaya. Indians of all classes and sub-communal backgrounds joined the movement. The strong and overpowering nature of the Indian nationalist ideology brought Indians together. The formation of various other organizations and youth corps to assist the independence movement enriched the experience of Indians in the county. Some of these organizations like the *Thondar Padai* (Volunteer Corps) were later revived by left-wing trade unions in the immediate post-war period to oppose employers in the plantations (Ramasamy 2000: 99).

Post-War Institutional Effects

The Indian community's involvement in the cause of India's independence was an experience that gave them dignity and self-respect. However, the failure of the INA to liberate India was a big blow to the thousands who had cast their lot with the independence movement. Having lost hope in the liberation of India, the INA returnees came back to face the social, political and economic realities of Malaya re-occupied by the British. As Stenson puts it aptly, "as hopes of an Indian liberation faded, thoughts turned to Malayan realities, to the struggle for survival and to specifically Malayan politics" (1980: 100). With the surrender of the Japanese and the emergence of the MCP, more and more Indians joined communist-dominated organizations such as the left-wing trade unions. To those Indians who had INA experience, involvement in the activities of the left-wing organizations was not a contradiction. For the majority, the struggle against British imperialism was a continuation of the struggle first headed by the INA.

Of course, Indians did not join the left-wing organizations blindly; their allegiance was built up during the war.

Indians, long used to being subservient to the Europeans, began to change under the influence of the anti-Western nature of Indian nationalist ideology. In the immediate post-war period, Indians who had gone through the INA experience were the most militant in challenging the British rule in Malaya. In fact, the majority of the left-wing trade union leaders were former INA members. According to Ramasamy, the Indian independence movement was important in two respects. First, it gave rise to strong nationalist feeling among Indians of different classes. Such broad, radical, nationalist sentiments were later effectively used to challenge the British domination of the country. Second, Indian participation in the INA proved useful to Indians who later challenged the British to improve their social and economic conditions (Ramasamy 1994: 60).

Besides aspiring for economic well-being through trade unionism, many used trade unions to launch Tamil schools to teach their children literacy and rudiments of education. Unionists started many Tamil schools. In the plantations, they pressured the management to help construct buildings for schools. As a consequence, hundreds of Tamil teachers were recruited to teach these children. Similarly, in Singapore, the majority of the Tamil schools were built by trade unions. In Singapore alone, there were 40 schools installed by trade unionists. When the emergency was declared in 1948, many of the administrators went underground. Many Tamil schools had to close without trade union support, and where the British found difficulty in maintaining the schools, they handed them over to friendly leaders of the Tamil community. In Singapore, for instance, the schools were handed over to the editor of Tamil Murasu, Sarangapani, to be looked after under the auspices of the Tamil Education Society (Sutherland 1989: 51). The trade union involvement in Tamil schools forced the British in the post-war period to establish an inspectorate system to supervise the curriculum and teaching in these schools. This was not the case in the pre-war years, when Tamil education was left in the hands of private well-wishers and missionaries.

In post-war Malaya, Indian participation in left-wing trade unions and the formation of political parties such as the Malayan Indian Congress were very much influenced by the nature of involvement in the INA. It would be difficult to explain Indian involvement in post-war politics in Malaya without reference to the INA. Many of those who held important leadership positions both in some of the leading trade unions and political parties had the INA experience. The formation of the Malayan Indian Congress in 1946, the establishment of a number of plantation unions and the amalgamation of these into the National Union of Plantation Workers in 1954 and the formation of hundreds of social and cultural organizations cannot be fathomed without understanding the INA movement and the particular leadership role of Bose.

In Singapore, too, unions like the Singapore Harbour Board Union had many INA members who played an active role. Somaiya rose to become the Secretary General of union, even though he spoke only Malay and Tamil. Many of the leaders in other trade unions were influenced to a large extent by the roles they played during the war years in the INA.

Another area in which the effects of the war years experience were felt was the organizational structure of Tamil social organizations in Malaya and Singapore. As the British oppressed Tamils in trade unions, many unionists also moved into social organizations. The Dravidian movement in India and the spread of *Thamizhar Thirunaal*

(festival to promote pride in being Tamils) came to be extended all over Malaya. As these were perceived as non-communist, they were allowed. Thus the development of Tamil social organizations multiplied all over Malaya among laboring classes. The Dravidian Association of Malaya had many branches all over Malaya and had in its leadership roles individuals who had served in the INA. In Singapore, the *Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* (DMK), (Dravidian Progressive Movement), formed along the ideals of the DMK in Tamil Nadu, followed the *Thondar Padai* example of the INA. It too had branches consisting of young men in all areas where Tamils resided in large numbers. Thus, the effects of INA extended far beyond its purpose after the war years.

In conclusion, it has to be noted that the lacuna that exists in the study of INA in Southeast Asia needs to be further explored and documented. This lacuna exists in not documenting the roles played by those involved in INA after it had disappeared from the social landscape of Southeast Asia.

When the history of the Indian Independence movement is finally written, Indians in Malaya will have a glorious place in that history. The contributions of Malayan Indians to India's struggle for freedom, by way of men, money and materials, has been great and Indian will remain grateful for the same. In particular, Malaya has contributed a large number of men who have fought bravely and died for India's freedom, and Malaya has made the largest contribution to the ranks of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. It was from Malaya that the call for Total Mobilization first went out (Subhas Chandra Bose).

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