



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

The Role of Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army in India's Struggle for Independence

Struggle for Independence: Military Nationalism, Transnational Mobilization and the Crisis of British Authority

¹Singh Aryaman Braham

¹Research Scholar,

¹Department of History,

¹B.K. Birla College, University of Mumbai, Mumbai, India

Abstract: The Indian National Army (INA), under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose, occupies a distinctive and contested place in the history of India's struggle for independence. Although the INA was militarily defeated during the Second World War, its historical significance cannot be assessed solely in terms of battlefield success. This article examines the role of Subhas Chandra Bose and the INA in India's anti-colonial struggle by situating their activities within the broader context of wartime Asian politics, Indian nationalism, and the crisis of the British Empire. It argues that Bose transformed the INA from an initially fragile military formation into a politically mobilized army linked to the Provisional Government of Azad Hind and a wider transnational Indian nationalist movement in Southeast Asia. The article examines Bose's political ideology, the reorganization and expansion of the INA, its relationship with Imperial Japan, the participation of women through the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, the military campaign toward India's northeastern frontier, and the subsequent INA trials. While the INA failed to achieve its immediate military objective of liberating India, its political and psychological consequences were considerable. The INA trials generated widespread public sympathy and brought together important sections of Indian political opinion, while the loyalty of Indian soldiers to the British Empire became an increasingly important question. The article argues that the principal contribution of Bose and the INA lay not in military victory but in challenging the legitimacy of colonial rule and contributing to the wider crisis of British authority in India.

Index Terms - Subhas Chandra Bose, Indian National Army, INA, Azad Hind, Indian nationalism, British Empire, Second World War, Southeast Asia, INA Trials

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of India's independence movement has traditionally been narrated through the activities of the Indian National Congress, Mahatma Gandhi's mass politics, constitutional negotiations, and the successive campaigns of non-cooperation, civil disobedience and the Quit India Movement. Within this dominant narrative, the armed nationalist strategy associated with Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army occupies a more complex position. Bose rejected the assumption that political independence could be achieved solely through non-violent mass mobilization and sought instead to exploit the international crisis created by the Second World War to overthrow British rule through military means.

The Indian National Army was not created by Bose. Its origins lay in the collapse of British power in Southeast Asia in 1941-42, when thousands of Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army became prisoners of war following the Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore. Captain Mohan Singh played a central role in the formation of the first INA, while Rash Behari Bose and the Indian Independence League attempted to

establish a broader political framework for Indian nationalism in Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia. The first INA subsequently experienced serious organizational and political difficulties. Bose's arrival in Southeast Asia in 1943 fundamentally altered the movement's trajectory.

Bose's importance therefore lies not simply in commanding the INA but in providing it with a political vision, institutional structure and mass appeal. Under his leadership, the INA was reconstructed, expanded and connected to the Provisional Government of Free India, or Azad Hind, established on 21 October 1943. Bose sought to present the INA as the military instrument of an independent Indian state rather than merely an auxiliary force of Japan.

This article examines the following central question: To what extent did Subhas Chandra Bose and the INA contribute to India's independence, despite their military defeat?

It argues that their contribution was principally political, psychological and ideological rather than conventionally military. The INA failed to defeat the British Indian Army, but it challenged the colonial state's claim to the unquestioned loyalty of Indian soldiers, mobilized Indian communities across Southeast Asia, popularized a militant conception of nationalism, and generated an extraordinary political response during the INA trials of 1945-46.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND RESEARCH GAP

The historiography of Subhas Chandra Bose and the INA has developed through several overlapping approaches. Earlier nationalist interpretations tended to celebrate Bose as a heroic revolutionary who sought independence through armed struggle. In contrast, some colonial and wartime interpretations portrayed the INA as an instrument of Japanese expansion or as a force dependent upon Axis military power. More recent scholarship has complicated both interpretations. Joyce C. Lebra's research, drawing substantially on Japanese sources, emphasizes the complex relationship between the INA and Japanese military and political objectives. Her work demonstrates that the Japanese relationship with the INA cannot be understood simply as either complete Japanese control or complete Indian independence from Japanese influence. Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the Southeast Asian dimension of the INA. Zardas Shuk-man Lee demonstrates that the INA and Indian Independence League mobilized diverse Indian communities in Japanese-occupied Southeast Asia and developed forms of political and ideological training intended to cultivate Indian nationalism. This scholarship is significant because it shifts attention from Bose as an isolated charismatic leader toward the social networks and Indian diaspora communities that sustained the movement. Another important historiographical development concerns the INA's post-war significance. Scholars have increasingly examined the trials of INA officers not merely as legal proceedings but as a major political event. The prosecution of INA officers in the Red Fort became a focal point of nationalist mobilization and generated sympathy that extended beyond supporters of Bose's political ideology. Despite these developments, there remains scope for an integrated analysis combining Bose's political thought, INA military activity, diaspora mobilization, gender, Japanese relations and the post-war crisis of colonial authority. This article attempts to bring these dimensions together.

III. SUBHAS CHANDRA BOSE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF MILITANT NATIONALISM

Subhas Chandra Bose emerged as one of the most important radical leaders of the Indian nationalist movement during the interwar period. His political career within the Indian National Congress brought him into increasing conflict with the leadership associated with Gandhi. Bose believed that India's political circumstances required greater organizational discipline, economic planning and preparation for a decisive struggle against British imperialism.

His election as Congress president in 1938 and again in 1939 revealed the depth of support for his approach but also exposed serious ideological differences within the organization. Following his resignation from the Congress presidency, Bose increasingly pursued an independent political strategy. The outbreak of the Second World War transformed the international environment. Bose regarded the war as an opportunity to exploit Britain's strategic vulnerability. After leaving India in 1941, he eventually reached Germany, where he attempted to organize Indian prisoners of war and establish international support for India's independence. The British records that Bose established the Indian Legion in Germany and used Azad Hind Radio to disseminate propaganda encouraging resistance to British rule. However, Southeast Asia ultimately provided a more significant theatre for his political and military project. In 1943 Bose travelled by submarine from Europe to Japanese-controlled Southeast Asia, arriving in a region where Indian communities and prisoners of war provided the human and material foundations for the revival of the INA.

IV. THE REORGANIZATION OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY

The first INA emerged following the Japanese victories in Southeast Asia. The surrender of Singapore in February 1942 resulted in the capture of tens of thousands of British Indian soldiers. These prisoners provided a potential military base for an Indian army directed against British rule. Rash Behari Bose and the Indian Independence League attempted to organize this force, while Captain Mohan Singh became the first commander of the INA. However, disagreements concerning Japanese intentions and Indian control weakened the organization. Recent research emphasizes that the first INA's collapse should not obscure the organizational groundwork established by Rash Behari Bose and other leaders before Subhas Chandra Bose's arrival. When Subhas Chandra Bose assumed leadership in 1943, he reorganized the movement on a much broader political basis. The INA became closely connected with the Indian Independence League and the Provisional Government of Azad Hind. Under Bose, recruitment extended beyond former prisoners of war. Indian civilians in Malaya, Singapore, Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia contributed personnel, money and other resources. Scholarship on the Southeast Asian Indian community indicates that the movement attracted people from diverse social and regional backgrounds. This development was important because it transformed the INA from a relatively narrow military project into a transnational nationalist movement.

V. AZAD HIND AND THE POLITICAL VISION OF BOSE

One of Bose's most significant contributions was the establishment of the Provisional Government of Free India, commonly known as Azad Hind, on 21 October 1943. The creation of Azad Hind had both symbolic and practical importance. Bose sought to demonstrate that the Indian independence movement possessed an alternative political authority capable of representing Indians internationally. The government was intended to give diplomatic legitimacy to the independence movement and provide a political framework for the INA. The government also reflected Bose's conception of nationalism. He envisioned a centralized and disciplined state capable of overcoming the social divisions that he believed weakened Indian resistance to colonial rule. The slogan "Delhi Chalo" encapsulated the political and military objective of the INA. Delhi represented not merely a geographical destination but the symbolic center of colonial power. The INA's military advance toward India was therefore intended to demonstrate that independence would be achieved through direct confrontation with imperial authority. The relationship between Azad Hind and Japan, however, remains one of the most debated aspects of Bose's career. Bose depended heavily on Japanese military assistance, weapons, transportation and territory. Japanese strategic interests also shaped the environment within which the INA operated. Consequently, Bose's wartime strategy involved a difficult contradiction: he sought Indian sovereignty while relying upon one of the principal expansionist powers of wartime Asia.

This relationship should therefore neither be romanticized nor reduced to the claim that Bose was simply a Japanese puppet. The historical evidence indicates a more complicated relationship involving both cooperation and competing interests. Consequently, Bose's wartime strategy involved a difficult contradiction: he sought Indian sovereignty while relying upon one of the principal expansionist powers of wartime Asia. This relationship should therefore neither be romanticized nor reduced to the claim that Bose was simply a Japanese puppet. The historical evidence indicates a more complicated relationship involving both cooperation and competing interests

VI. THE INA'S MILITARY CAMPAIGN

The military objective of the INA was to enter India alongside Japanese forces and stimulate an uprising against British rule.

The decisive campaign came in 1944 during the Japanese offensive toward northeastern India. INA units participated alongside Japanese forces in the advance toward Imphal and Kohima. The campaign initially created considerable expectations among INA supporters, but Japanese logistical difficulties, disease, inadequate supplies and determined Allied resistance ultimately resulted in defeat. The INA was unable to achieve its strategic objective of penetrating deeply into India or generating the mass military uprising anticipated by Bose. From a strictly military perspective, therefore, the INA's contribution was limited. It lacked the resources necessary to defeat the British Indian Army, and the Japanese defeat in the Asia-Pacific theatre made continued resistance increasingly impossible. Yet assessing the INA solely through military statistics would overlook its wider historical significance. The very existence of an Indian army fighting against the British under an Indian national flag challenged the ideological foundations of colonial rule. The British Empire depended heavily upon Indian military participation. The emergence of the INA therefore

created an important psychological and political problem: Could the colonial government continue to rely upon the unquestioned loyalty of Indian soldiers?

VII. WOMEN AND THE RANI OF JHANSI REGIMENT

One of the most distinctive features of Bose's INA was its mobilization of women. The Rani of Jhansi Regiment, commanded by Captain Lakshmi Swaminathan (later Lakshmi Sahgal), was established as a women's military formation. Its existence challenged conventional gender assumptions surrounding warfare and nationalism. Women from Indian communities in Southeast Asia participated in the regiment, which became an important symbol of Bose's effort to construct a modern and revolutionary nationalist movement. Recent scholarship notes that the regiment was composed largely of women volunteers from Southeast Asian Indian communities. The regiment's military role should not be exaggerated: it did not become a decisive combat force comparable to the principal INA formations. Nevertheless, its symbolic importance was considerable. It presented women as active participants in the struggle for national liberation rather than merely supporters of male revolutionaries. The regiment also demonstrates the importance of examining the INA through the lens of gender history, rather than treating it exclusively as a military institution.

VIII. THE INA AND INDIAN SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The INA's strength depended substantially upon the Indian diaspora of Southeast Asia. Indian communities in Malaya, Singapore, Burma and other territories contributed financial resources, recruits and political support. The movement thus connected the Indian independence struggle with the broader history of migration and diaspora nationalism. Recent research has shown that the INA and Indian Independence League attempted to cultivate nationalist consciousness through political and ideological education. Training programs encouraged recruits to understand themselves as members of a larger Indian national community despite differences of religion, region, language and class. This was particularly significant in a colonial context in which Indian communities outside the subcontinent had developed identities shaped by local conditions. The INA consequently functioned not merely as an army but as a vehicle of political socialization. It sought to create a disciplined national community whose members regarded liberation from British rule as a shared obligation.

IX. BOSE, JAPAN AND THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

The greatest controversy surrounding Bose concerns his cooperation with the Axis powers. Bose's decision to seek German and Japanese assistance has generated extensive historical debate. His calculation was fundamentally strategic: Britain was engaged in a global war, and its enemies possessed the resources that could potentially assist India's liberation. Yet this strategy carried enormous political risks. Nazi Germany and imperial Japan were themselves authoritarian and expansionist regimes. Japanese occupation of Southeast Asia involved considerable violence and coercion, complicating the image of Japan as a straightforward supporter of Asian liberation. Modern scholarship therefore encourages a more nuanced interpretation. Japan did support the INA, but Japanese policy toward India was not identical to Bose's political objectives. Japanese strategic calculations remained central to the relationship. Bose's cooperation with Japan can consequently be understood as an example of anti-colonial nationalism operating within the constraints of wartime geopolitics. The central question is not simply whether Bose's alliance with Japan was controversial - it unquestionably was, but whether that alliance should invalidate the broader anti-colonial objectives of the INA. Both aspects of the relationship need to be considered.

X. THE COLLAPSE OF THE INA AND BOSE'S DEATH

The military defeat of Japan in 1945 brought the INA project to an end. Thousands of INA personnel were captured or surrendered, and many were subsequently interrogated and repatriated to India. Bose himself died in an air crash in August 1945 according to the official historical account, although controversy concerning the circumstances of his death persisted for decades. With the collapse of Japanese power, the INA ceased to exist as an effective military force. From one perspective, this represented the failure of Bose's strategy. However, the most important consequences of the INA emerged after its military defeat.

XI. THE INA TRIALS AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

The INA trials of 1945–46 represented a major turning point in the political history of late colonial India. The British authorities decided to prosecute selected INA officers, including Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, at the Red Fort in Delhi. The trials generated widespread public interest and nationalist mobilization. The Indian National Congress established an INA Defence Committee, and prominent lawyers participated in the defence. Jawaharlal Nehru was among those associated with the legal defence effort. Contemporary records document the establishment of the Defence Committee and its role in defending the accused officers. The political significance of the trials extended beyond Bose's followers. The accused officers represented different religious communities, and the campaign around them acquired a strongly national character. The INA therefore became a symbol of Indian unity at a moment when communal tensions were becoming increasingly severe. The trials also produced an important paradox. The INA had been defeated militarily, but the prosecution of its personnel transformed the organization into a political symbol. As later scholarship has argued, the trials became central to debates over the meaning of Indian nationalism and the legitimacy of British military authority.

XII. THE INA AND THE CRISIS OF BRITISH AUTHORITY

The precise relationship between the INA and India's independence remains a matter of historical debate. It would be simplistic to claim that the INA alone forced Britain to leave India. The independence of India resulted from a combination of factors: decades of nationalist mobilization, mass movements, economic pressures, changing international conditions, the consequences of the Second World War, and the declining capacity of European empires. Nevertheless, the INA contributed to the crisis of colonial legitimacy. The British Indian Army was one of the principal foundations of imperial power in South Asia. The INA demonstrated that Indian soldiers could be persuaded to turn their weapons against the colonial state. Even though the number of INA soldiers was small in relation to the entire British Indian military establishment, the political implications of military defection were significant. Recent scholarship emphasizes that the INA's battlefield achievements were limited but that the trials subsequently created substantial political and psychological consequences for British authorities.

The INA therefore challenged the colonial state on two levels:

1. Materially, by attempting to create an armed force capable of fighting the British.
2. Psychologically, by challenging the assumption that Indian soldiers would remain loyal to the British Empire.

The second challenge ultimately proved more enduring.

XIII. REASSESSING BOSE'S CONTRIBUTION TO INDEPENDENCE

The historical contribution of Subhas Chandra Bose should neither be exaggerated into a claim that he alone liberated India nor minimized because the INA lost its military campaigns. First, he internationalized the Indian independence struggle by taking it beyond the territorial boundaries of India and engaging governments and Indian communities across Europe and Asia. Second, he militarized nationalism by constructing an Indian army that explicitly fought for national independence. Third, he mobilized the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia on an unprecedented scale, transforming expatriate communities into participants in the independence struggle. Fourth, he attempted to construct an alternative Indian state through Azad Hind, thereby presenting independence as an exercise in sovereignty rather than merely a demand for constitutional reform. Fifth, the INA and its trials contributed to the political crisis surrounding British rule after the Second World War. These contributions must be balanced against serious limitations. Bose's dependence on Axis powers created ethical and political contradictions. The INA remained dependent upon Japanese military resources and never acquired the independent strategic capacity necessary to defeat British forces. Its campaign in northeastern India ended in military failure. Thus, Bose's greatest historical contribution arguably lay not in the direct military overthrow of British rule but in altering the political imagination of independence and contributing to the erosion of colonial confidence.

XIV. CONCLUSION

The history of Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army cannot be adequately understood through the narrow question of whether the INA won or lost its military campaigns. Militarily, the INA failed to accomplish its principal objective: the liberation of India through armed struggle. Its dependence on Japan, logistical weaknesses and the broader collapse of the Axis war effort severely restricted its effectiveness.

Yet historical significance cannot be measured solely by military victory. Bose transformed the INA into a political army and connected it with a broader vision of Indian sovereignty. Through Azad Hind, he attempted to create an alternative state authority; through the INA, he attempted to create an army of national liberation; through the mobilization of Indians in Southeast Asia, he transformed diaspora communities into active participants in Indian nationalism; and through the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, he expanded the symbolic boundaries of participation in the nationalist struggle.

The INA's greatest impact emerged after its defeat. The Red Fort trials transformed defeated soldiers into national symbols. The campaign surrounding the trials brought together political groups that otherwise disagreed sharply about the methods and future of Indian nationalism. More importantly, the INA raised a fundamental question concerning the foundations of British rule: Could an empire continue to govern India if the loyalty of its most important coercive institution, the Indian armed forces, could no longer be taken for granted? The evidence does not support the view that the INA single-handedly won India's independence. Rather, it formed one important component of the broader crisis of British imperial authority after the Second World War. Subhas Chandra Bose's historical legacy therefore rests on a paradox. His army suffered military defeat, but his political project survived as a powerful nationalist memory. The INA did not march victoriously into Delhi, but the image of an Indian army fighting under the banner of independence profoundly affected Indian political consciousness. Its legacy demonstrates that anti-colonial movements can exercise historical influence even when they fail to achieve their immediate military objectives. The role of Bose and the INA should consequently be understood as part of a larger, multidimensional process of decolonization, in which mass nationalism, political negotiation, revolutionary action, wartime transformation, military loyalty and international politics interacted to weaken the foundations of British rule.

References / Selected Bibliography

Primary and archival sources

- Ayer, S. A. The Story of the I.N.A.
- Bose, Subhas Chandra. The Indian Struggle, 1920–1942. London: Wishart, 1948.
- Government of India. Report on the Indian National Army Trials.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. Documents relating to the INA Defence Committee, 1945..
- British War Office records concerning Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army, The, United Kingdom.

Secondary sources

- Fay, Peter Ward. The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942–1945. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- Lebra, Joyce C. The Indian National Army and Japan. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2008.
- Mani, A. and P. Ramasamy. "Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army: A Southeast Asian Perspective." *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 22 (2007): 1–10
- Lee, Zardas Shuk-man. "The Indian National Army and the Making of Indian Nationalism in Japanese-Occupied Malaya." *The Historical Journal* 68, no. 4 (2025): 837–856.
- Alpers, Maybritt Jill. "The Congress and the INA Trials, 1945–50: A Contest over the Perception of 'Nationalist' Politics."
- "The 'Right to Wage War' against Empire: Anticolonialism and the Challenge to International Law in the Indian National Army Trial of 1945." *Law & Social Inquiry*.