# Re-Reading Netaji Subhas in the Context of Imphal Expedition

*Dr. Somarani Chand*

Call him 'Desh Nayak' (Tagore) or 'Modern Ulysses' (Hayashida), an impartial enquiry into Subhas Bose's achievements can be evaluated in either of the two ways or both. As a macro study, this can be done vis-a-vis the entire scenario of the Indian Freedom Struggle; or microscopically, his singular successes can be seen in their individual perspectives. The aim of this paper is to re-read Netaji Subhas in the context of Imphal expedition of the I.N.A in 1944.

Giving a slip to the British intelligence hawks, he vanished from the Indian soil in 1941. Proceeding through northern India and Afghanistan, he managed to meet the Axis heroes – Hitler and Mussolini – who were very much convinced with his cause. Even the German foreign ministers Ribbeontrop, Field Marshal Romel were prepared to extend their wholehearted cooperation. But Subhas was aware of the emergence of Japan as a super power in the South East Asian Politics. Just six days after his arrival in Berlin on 9 April 1941, he sent a long secret report to the German leaders entitled "Role of Axis Powers and the Possible Cooperation of India" where he categorically emphasized the importance of Japan as a belligerent power against the British.

Ultimately he arrived in Japan in 1943 from Europe after ninety days of dangerous sub-marine voyage through the enemy infested waters to launch his campaign for India's freedom. Once he reached Japan, he showed super human skill in organising the Indian National Army raising the inferior elements to a magnificent stature in South East Asia, a region under colonial hegemony craving for its own political identity.

The meeting of Subhas Bose with the Japanese Premier Tojo on 10 June 1943 is indeed very significant because after the meeting Netaji did not have to look back. Tojo was struck by not only his depth of knowledge and oratory but by his iron will reflected through his eyes and

granite desire expressed through his voice. ("Netaji…and Japan", 100)

A provisional government called Azad Hind Government was formed on 21 October, 1943. As the President, he took the oath saying, "I swear by God that I will do my best to emancipate India and its 380 million people. I will abide by this oath till my death." (Hayashida, 58)

With a few days of the formation of this provisional government, independent countries like Germany, Croatia, China (Nanking), Manchukuo, Burma, Philipines, Italy, Japan and Shyam gave their recognition. As a mark of friendship, Tojo gave the authority of Andaman and Nicober Islands to the Azad Hind Government. It was renamed as Independent and Swaraj Islands. But due to the unfriendly attitude of the Japanese naval authorities, the Azad Hind Government became master only by name and not by practice. Yet it was not merely a puppet government in the Japanese hands as claimed by the British and their allies – a fact accepted by the recent Western researchers. (Peter Fey, 260-261)

Within ten months of the formation of the government a new lease of life was inflicted into the dry veins of a weak army who were now prepared to implement the plan and programme of their leader. On 7 January 1944, the Azad Hind Government proceeded to Rangoon because Netaji had planned to use Burma as a springboard for his military operations in India. He visited Andaman and Nicober islands where he reiterated his determination to save the region from their age-old humiliation and developed it as an integral part on India. Lt. Col. A.D.Loknathan was appointed as the Chairman of Administrative Preparatory Committee. A Japanese-Indo-Burmese military liaison group was formed for facilitating the joint operation of I.N.A and the Japanese army. By early March, three divisions under the Japanese 15th Army Command had been deployed on the left bank of the Chindoween river. Of these, the 31st division was deployed so as to aim at Kohima, north of Imphal. Lt. Gen. Mutaguchi was in overall charge of the Kohima-Imphal expedition.

It was the desire of Subhas Bose that the I.N.A. with its thirty thousand strong infantry and twenty thousand trained volunteers would fight separately from different areas of the frontier. He wanted the I.N.A to fight in the Arkan regions so that from there it would spread to Chattagram (now in Bangladesh) and then to whole of Bengal by guerilla tactics. Then getting local support, they would rampage airfields, train lines and other routes of communication. He had in his mind the memories of the Battle of Remu where the Burmese army had humiliated the British. (Bannerji, 358)

The accuracy of his plans bore its result during the first phase of the "Operation U", which was the blueprint of the Japanese attack on Kohima-Imphal where to sidetrack the Britishers, first attack was made on the Arkan frontiers and the second phase would be Kohima-Imphal annexation.

In the first phase, one battalion of the I.N.A. under Major R.C. Raturi occupied the Moudak areas with such extraordinary skill that the Divisional Commander of the British army Gen. Frank Massarvee was disqualified from service till September 1944. (Barker, 85)

When Subhas could not get the promised support and assistance from the Japanese chiefs,

he wanted to spread the campaign to the plains of Assam including Dimapur, because he was well aware that once he could reach there his unbounded popularity would automatically accelerate his progress. And Dimapur being a central place, there would be no dearth of food and other supplies. Even though Tojo and Mutaguchi had positive attitudes, it could not be worked out in the long run due to the rejection of this plan by many of the Japanese officers. Had this plan been implemented, the course of the Indian Freedom Struggle could have been different. (Pandit, 246-247)

The stubborn attitude of some of the Japanese officials also astonished the British generals because Dimpur happened to be the feedback area for the British army. The Commander of the British 14th Regiment Lt. Gen. W.J.Sleam writes in his book "Defeat unto Victory" about the absurd conceptions of the Japanese officials which turned the table for the British. When the Japanese were unnecessarily wasting their precious time at Kohima, Sleam immediately brought two platoons of Anglo-American troops by air and caught the war-torn I.N.A. soldiers from behind. Netaji's dream was thus shattered to pieces.

In spite of the failure of Netaji's dream, that Subhas Bose had tremendous support from the general public is evident from the proceedings of the National Defence Council held at New Delhi on 1 July 1943 where the I.N.A. soldiers were referred to as spies, traitors and fifth columnists. Subhas Bose himself was named as hero of fifth columnists, traitor and Tojo's dog' in a report by the- then Chief Secretary of Assam, H.G. Denchy.

In all government, military and intelligence reports, the I.N.A. soldiers were named *JIFCS* meaning Japanese Inspired Fifth Columnist Spies and the parachute wing of the I.N.A. was named BATS meaning Burma Area Turned Spies. The government announced huge rewards to catch either the JIFCS or the BATS. The government also opened a counter movement called 'Operation Denial' to spread anti-I.N.A. information. Pro-British bureaucrats and those members of Congress and the Communist Party who were averse to Subhas Bose on personal grounds joined hands with the British government to make a mockery of the trial of the I.N.A. soldiers at Red Fort.

It is evident from contemporary government records that "Operation U" was successful at its initial stage before the Kohima-Imphal expedition so much so that Major Lakshan Swarup Mishra was awarded the title *Sardar-i-Jung* by the Azad Hind government. (Giyan, 115-116) More surprisingly from 28th March (when Kohima operation was inaugurated) up to 31st March, the entire road between Dimapur and Imphal was controlled by the Japanese army and the I.N.A. The then Deputy Commissioner Charles Pawsey has mentioned in the official records that seize of Kohima was unsuccessful no doubt, but for a slightest chance Kohima city proper, market and villages were under their control except the bungalow of the Deputy Commissioner as it was a top. (Reports of Charles Pawsey, 1946) The feedback centre of the army was totally detached. If they would have defeated the battalion, Dimapur would have come under their direct occupation. And from there they would have straight forward entered to plains of Assam, because by the time sufficient soldiers were not there at Dimapur. (The same report by Pawsey) And Subhas exactly wanted this.

On 8th April, from the general Imperial headquarters of Japan about the dual attack the following declarations were made.

(i) Our crack troop fighting side by side with I.N.A. captured Kohima early on 6th April.

(ii) Our attack on the enemy's airborne troops in the Kata area is moving along smoothly. (Hayashida)

During the dark days of the British people, a handful of Gorkha regiment, few hundreds of British soldiers and some exceptional patriots like pawsey getting help from the local stuff and Naga Labour Crops totally reversed the situation (Campbell). After the war all of them were heavily rewarded by the British government.

Thus, the ill fated campaign from lofty dreams doomed to failure due to miscalculation of the Japanese authority. If 1857 revolt is regarded as the First War of Indian Independence, the Kohima-Imphal campaign can be treated as the last in the category. The exuberance of chivalry and patriotism by the demoralized elements of neglected Indian soldiers, make its own place in annals of independent India.

Fiftyseven years after independence, researchers continue to make threadbare analysis of Netaji's operations. In an age when mass hysteria is at its peak against nuclear warfare – for example, Americans still search for their brethrens' momentous loss during the Vietnam war- it is a heartbreaking fact that two of the world's earliest atom bombs put an end to the World War II. In this connection, Netaji's planned March to the plains of Assam and undivided Bengal might not have changed the course of Indian history overnight. Yet, all said and done, it is such rare feats- the likes of Tipu Sultan to Subhas Bose – that make history and are remembered by the gen-next with awe and reverence.

### *References :*


1. Banerjee, A.C., *The Eastern Frontier of British India: 1784-1826,* Assam, 1946.
2. Barker, A.J., *The March on Delhi*, Dehradun, 1990.
3. Campbell, Arthur., *The Seized*,
4. Fey, Peter., *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence (1942-45)*, Michigan, 1995.
5. Giyan, K.S., *Indian Independence Movement in East Asia*, Lahore, 1947.
6. Hayashida, T., *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: His Great Struggle and Martyrdom*, Bombay, 1970.
7. Pandit, H.N., *Netaji Subhas Bose : From Kabul to Battle of Imphal*, Delhi, 1988.
8. Pawsey, Charles R., *Report of the Deputy Commissioner*, 1946.
9. *Fifth Column Activities in India*. Report by H.G. Denchy, Chief Secretary, Assam, to the Ministry of Home, New Delhi. Memo No C-230/41, 4.9.1943.
10. *Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Japan*. Prepared by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tokyo, Japan.


Dr. Somarani Chand, Reader in History, Utkal University, Vani Vihar, Bhubaneswar.