

# Manipur's Engagement with the Indian National Army: Historical Insights into the Freedom Struggle

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## Abstract:

From the Treaty of Yandaboo of 1826 onwards, the administration system of Manipur was virtually controlled by British India. Further, the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891 led to the annexation of Manipur, which became a part of British India later. From the regional involvement of the struggle, the local population of Manipur was seen actively supporting the Indian National Army (Azad Hind Fauj) for the independence of Manipur and India as a whole. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 1944, the tricolour Indian flag was hoisted and established at the headquarters of the INA at Moirang Kangla, Moirang, Bishnupur District, Manipur. Though the government of Manipur gave support to the British, the local population of the state showed mental and physical support to the INA as a part of the freedom movement. The methodology of the paper will be based on a historical perspective. It is based on both primary and secondary sources, which will be collected from various libraries. This paper identifies the main contributions of the volunteers from different religions and regions, giving active support to the organisation of the army. Over and above, it will produce the role of the local people in the three months of the Provisional INA Government in Manipur, as well as the Battle of Imphal during the Second World War period. The objective of this paper is to analyse the historical framework of the contributions of the Manipuris in the INA movement for their independence. Nowadays, the central government is making more efforts to recognise the untold historical contributions of North-East India in the freedom movement of India. This paper will play a vital role in the inclusion of Manipur to point out the responsibilities in the freedom movement of India.

**Keywords:** Moirang, Second World War, Imphal.

“GIVE ME BLOOD, I WILL GET YOU FREEDOM.”<sup>1</sup>

– Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose

## Introduction

Manipur, the easternmost part of India, is a mountainous region, isolated from the neighbouring states by a chain of mountain ranges. It is one of the most beautiful spots with its delightful physical features, tradition, and history. Lord Irwin, the then Viceroy of India, described Manipur as ‘the Switzerland of India. The Japanese call her “on the lofty height”. Manipur was an ancient kingdom that had enjoyed the fortune and glory and sorrow and vicissitudes of its long history. Manipur is a cradle of human civilisation and creativity, which has come under the influence of many different ethnic groups who came at various times and contributed to the growth of the civilisation in this hilly state in India's north-eastern frontier. Manipur started the connection with the British government under the Anglo-Manipuri Treaty, 1762, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1762 (Treaty between Haridas Gosain on behalf of Raja Jai Singh, king of Manipur, and

<sup>1</sup> Talwar, L. C. Captain, (1972). *Netaji and his I. N. A. Souvenir*, 75<sup>th</sup> Birth Day Celebration of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose (23.1.71) and unveiling ceremony of Netaji Statue. Moirang: The Indian National Army Martyr's Memorial Committee. p.10.

Mr Henry Verelset, the chief of Chittagong factory, on behalf of the British). In due course of time, Manipur faced a great loss at the hands of the Burmese in the year 1819 and was devastated for seven years, which was popularly known as “Chahi Taret Khuntakpa (Seven Years Devastation)” in the history of Manipur. Taking the help of the British government, Gambhir Singh, along with the British forces, retaliated and regained independence in 1826 and concluded the Treaty of Yandaboo, 1826. From that onwards, the British government started intervention in the administration of Manipur as a part of British India. The atrocities and inhuman treatment of the Manipuris resulted in the Anglo-Manipuri War in 1891. Thus, Manipur was annexed by the British government. From that onwards, the people of Manipur faced a series of atrocities committed by the British colonial government till independence.

### INA Outside India

Reaching Tokyo on May 6, 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose revived the Indian National Army.<sup>2</sup> (INA) popularly known as Azad Hind Fauj<sup>3</sup> And formed the Provincial Government of Azad Hind on October 21, 1943 and declared war on Britain and America. This second INA fought along with the Imperial Japanese Army against the British and Commonwealth forces in the campaigns in Burma, Imphal, and Kohima, and later, against the successful Burma Campaign of the Allies. Bose believed Manipur would be in a strategic position for the liberation of India. Accordingly, he planned to capture Manipur and Chittagong. With the negotiation of General Kawabe, the commander-in-chief of East Asia, the Japanese forces and the INA started their operation on 4<sup>th</sup> February 1944 for the liberation of India.<sup>4</sup>

### INA in Manipur

Though the King of Manipur gave active support to the British government, the local people of both the hills and valley of Manipur helped the INA and Japanese forces in many ways, viz., collection of large quantities of rations, espionage activities, mobilising the youths to participate in the war, communication with local people, distributing the pamphlets of the INA, etc. Some members of Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha supported Netaji by joining the INA movement against the British government. Admitting a full member of the INA, Naki Ahmad Choudhury served in the British Indian Army as a local soldier. He mentioned the difficulty of the Japanese forces in obtaining food and local assistance. He witnessed Col. S.A. Malik's role in gaining support from the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha and the Thanga villagers. Since Manipur was a princely state, Congress was not allowed to be formed and function. Even Gandhiji was not allowed to enter Manipur. But the leaders and workers of Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, which has identical ideas and objectives to the Indian National Congress, welcomed the appeal made by Netaji. Thirteen members of the Mahasabha, namely Sarva Shri 1) Th. Angou Singh, 2) P. Tomal Singh, 3) S. Ibohal Singh, 4) I. Tombi Singh, 5) L Bijoy Singh, 6) L. Kanhai Singh, 7) M. Jatra Singh, 8) W Gyaneshwar Singh, 9) M Amubi Singh, 10) L. Iabot Singh, 11) Kh. Jugeshwar Singh, 12) Srimati O Keinya Devi, and 13) Srimati M Randhoni Devi reached Moirang secretly. They joined with the members of Moirang and worked together with the people of Moirang for further strategies for independence. Accordingly, a large quantity of food was collected for the Indo-Japanese forces and carried out espionage activities, and the villagers voluntarily donated foodstuffs carried by head and bullock carts to the Japanese forces. Most prominent who took an active role in the valley are Mairembam Koireng, Naki Ahmed Choudhury, Hemam Nilamani, M. Jatra Singh, M. Ahanjao Singh, Mutum Amuba, Laishram Irabot Singh, O. Keina Devi, Sarungbam Ibohal Singh, Th. Angou Singh, Laishram Guna Singh, etc. The house of Hemam Nilamani was converted into the headquarters of the INA<sup>5</sup>. Declaring independence of India, the Indian Tricolour was hoisted by Col. Shaukat A. Malik on 14th April 1944 at Moirang Kangla in a

<sup>2</sup> Toye, Hugh. (2007). *Subhas Chandra Bose: The Springing Tiger*. Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House. p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Azad Hind Fauj was founded by Captain Mohan Singh on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1942 at Singapore. He was one of the prisoners of war and a former officer of the British Indian Army captured during the Malay campaign. It was collapsed in December 1942.

<sup>4</sup> Dena, Lal. (2019). *History of Modern Manipur*. Imphal. Jain Book Shop Publication. p.168.

<sup>5</sup> Kamei, Gangmumei. (2016). *A History of Modern Manipur 1820-2000*. New Delhi: Akansa Publishing House, p.182.

ceremonial manner as a mark of the liberation of Moirang and neighbouring villages from British colonial rule. Over and above, women from the state joined the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the INA under their leader, Lakshmi Sehgal. The message was well received by the jubilant crowd, who felt that they were the first liberated people of India, though many of their families evacuated Moirang and took shelter at Thanga, Sendra, and Mamang Ching. They voluntarily donated provisions to the advanced Indo-Japanese forces. The voluntary campaign was led by Shri Kuman Kanglen Singh of Moirang.

### **Japanese Invasion Of Manipur And the INA**

The fast advancement of Indo-Japanese forces with heavy guns and tanks was resisted by the British at Bishnupur. Even though hand-to-hand fighting took place between Bishnupur and Ningthoukhong, both the British and Indo-Japanese forces tried tooth and nail to overpower each other. The battle between the British and the Indo-Japanese forces in the area was one of the bloodiest in the Battle of Imphal. The objective of the Indo-Japanese forces was to capture the strongly fortified British camp at Bishnupur. On failing to capture the British camp, the Indo-Japanese forces bypassed the area, followed the western hill ranges, and put up a blockade to British supplies at Lokpaching (Red Hill) for 48 hours at the cost of heavy casualties on both sides. But it was recaptured by the British forces after heavy fighting. The Indo-Japanese could not pass heavy guns and tanks through Bishnupur.

The 15th Japanese Division, with the INA forces, marched towards Tamu and Ukhrul in two ways, and the latter was captured. They further advanced towards Imphal Imphal-Dimapur road. In the meantime, another group of the Division reached Pallel, but they could not come down to the valley. The 33rd Japanese Division, along with the INA volunteers, marched towards Tiddim Road. Under L. Guna Singh of Khurai, Imphal, some Manipuris who were in Burma joined the INA. Thirteen out of thirty-two Manipuris reached Pallel and tried to secure the support of the local people. They spread propaganda among the people of the Samara tract and Kabaw Valley that they could obtain Swaraj with the assistance of Japanese forces. A large number of 'V' Force, an organisation of local scouts, with the help of the Naga and Kuki volunteers, also joined the movement and participated in the war front. Further, establishing their Indian headquarters at Kamjong, the village of Manipur was attempted to be conquered by the joint forces of the Japanese army and Ringshi Keishing, an INA volunteer in Manipur. He was instrumental in bringing the Japanese to Manipur from Burma. He led them up to Kohima to cut the main Imphal- Dimapur road, north of Imphal, and swarm towards Jesami.

The rest nineteen Manipuris marched down to Khuga Tampak. Out of them, four members were arrested from Saikot and taken to Calcutta to be released after the War. In April 1944, village local people of Moirang and the surrounding villagers were alerted about the war. M. Koireng was one of the politically aware local leaders who backed the Japanese forces when they arrived in Moirang. He supplied food grains for the INA soldiers as well as the Japanese forces. The locals also donated the food to the Japanese force's camp at Phubala. The 17<sup>th</sup> British Division could not oppose the advancing Indo-Japanese forces, and as such, they were compelled to retreat, leaving completely behind all the southern hill ranges of Manipur up to Potsangbam. On the morning of 14<sup>th</sup> April 1944, it was reported secretly that some Indo-Japanese forces had reached Tronglaobi village, Moirang. Moirang was privileged as the sacred soil of India liberated for the first time by the INA from British colonial rule. P. Tomal Singh was one of the few Manipur political workers who responded to Netaji's call.

During the Japanese War in Manipur in 1941-42, he went to Moirang and stayed for about four months to join the Indian National Army (INA)-led war for Indian independence. He joined the INA-led movement in the last week of 1944, according to his fellow INA veteran, Hemam Nilamani Singh, while he was Deputy Education Minister to the Government of Manipur at the time Moirang was captured by the INA. He was one of the 13 members of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha who secretly travelled to Moirang from Imphal and other locations. They joined forces with Moirang members and collaborated on espionage

operations. Two battalions of the INA were led by Shah Nawaz Khan. Khan reached Tiddim at the end of March to move along with the Japanese forces. The INA Group, under Shoukat Ali Malik, along with the local volunteers, were active in this sector. A Special emissary brought a message from Netaji appealing to the leaders and workers of the India National Congress and of the People of Manipur, in general, to extend unreserved support to the Indo-Japanese forces who had crossed the Indo-Burmese border and reached Manipur. The message was brought by Chamol (INA advance Base Camp) by one Kuki, named Lungdam, and handed over to Dr Gulapchand Singh, then the Medical Officer posted at Sugnu. It was again handed over to Shri Thokchom Angou Singh of Singjamei, Imphal.

### **Fate Of Manipuri INA Volunteers**

Many active members of Manipur Praja Sanmelani were arrested for supporting Subhas Chandra Bose and the Japanese forces and kept in the Langthabal Military Jail. Heavy rainfall started at the beginning of July. All the Indo-Japanese forces, along with the INA volunteers, including the local leaders, started retreating in the middle of July to Burma. Many army personnel on their way to Rangoon died due to starvation, dysentery, and diarrhoea after a long journey on foot through Tiddim Road. After the surrender of Japan to the Allied forces in the middle of August 1945, the INA at Rangoon had to surrender. The members from Manipur were also arrested by the Rangoon occupying forces from their hiding places and put in Rangoon Central jail. They were brought to Calcutta by ship and released after detention and interrogation for about 48 hours.

The Manipur party was sent to Manipur by rail and road at government expense and reached Manipur on May 6, 1946, with an instruction to report to the state government. Thus ended the contribution of Manipuris to the INA movement. The party reached Kalemyo, a border town of Burma. In their war with Kalemyo, they suffered a lot. They took cover in the dense forest during the day and marched on foot at night. Their ration on the way from Tiddim to Kalemyo was maize, and only after Kalemyo, they could get rice. After Kalemyo, they proceed further towards Kalewa and from Kalewa to Ye-u (on their way to Rangoon). The civilians on their way from Kalewa to Ye-u were escorted by one Gurkha Lt of the Bahadur Group, who died at Ye-u. It was one of the terminal railway stations nearest to the border. The trains were driven by firewood, and coaches were open. The trains had daily services but only during the night. During the daytime, engines of the trains were sidetracked behind the cover of thick jungles, and coaches were kept scattered.

At dusk, the engines and coaches were connected and took proper shape for service. The party reached Sagaing. It happened to be a big Manipur village. The inhabitants of Seigaing spoke (and still speak) Manipuri in pidgin form. The party crossed the river by motorboat in small groups. Immediately after crossing the Irawadi, they arrived at Mandalay and then at Rangoon. Trains running between Mandalay and Rangoon were good ones. Over and above, the people of Manipur survived through rations, and agricultural activities were stopped during the course of the war. Several houses were burnt, and relief measures were highly essential. The War brought extensive damage to Manipur. After the defeat, local leaders retreated with the Indo-Japanese forces to Burma. After the Red Fort Trail, Manipuri leaders continued to work in the Bengal INA Relief Committee, and they continued to take an active role in the politics of the state.

### **Conclusion**

All the Manipuris whose energies by dire necessities and compulsions had been exhausted in venturing the retreat through wild-animals-infested jungles, dangerous hill ranges, and rivers, their suffering did not come to an end. Acute malaria had affected them, and no one was spared. They were hospitalised for medical treatment at Miyang Hospital, about 10 km away from Rangoon. Formerly, it was a public hospital; later, it was converted into a military hospital for the INA. British aircraft, altogether eleven in number, exercised aerial bombing over the hospital. Many patients died and were injured in the inhuman

act of bombing. Shri H Nilamani, one of the members from Manipur, suffered a minor injury in his hand. On their way to Rangoon, Shri Kiyam Gopal Singh, the only son of late K Tomba Singh from Moirang, died at Tanjung Camp on August 17, 1944. His last rites were performed with full military honour on the bank of the Myintha (Chindwin) River. A large number of people from Manipur were involved in the last war of independence in Manipur, interacting between the Indo-Japanese forces and the allied forces. The liberation army, dispossessed of British rule, occupied almost all the hills of Manipur, came down to the valley; occupied Pallel in the south-east; Kameng, Sekmai, Kangpokpi, and Kanglatombi in the north-east; Torbung and Moirang in the southwest; Bishnupur and Irengbam/Lokpaching (Red Hill) in the heart of the valley. Only a small portion of the Manipur valley could not be liberated. Without the cooperation and involvement of the local people, three Divisions of the Japanese Army and One Brigade of the INA might not have been able to enter Manipur, and they might not have been able to continue heavy fighting for three months against the mighty Allied forces.

The Indian National Army (INA) Martyrs' Memorial Complex at Moirang in Bishnupur District was established in 1985 as a tribute to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and the INA personnel who hoisted the Indian national Tri-color flag at Moirang for the first time on Indian soil. The INA Museum and Library are the two main components of the Memorial. The INA Museum displays more than 1000 museum objects and documents relating to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and the INA movement. The Indian National Army Memorial and Museum at Moirang is a replica of the INA War Memorial originally built in Singapore and is famous for housing an imposing statue of Subhas Chandra Bose. The museum displays a fine collection of arms and ammunition, bayonets, helmets, and other articles used by the soldiers of the INA. The museum also displays books, documents, manuscripts, and periodicals that depict India's history and its freedom struggle. The memorial holds immense historical significance as this was the place where Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose hoisted the Indian tricolour as the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian National Army, for the first time during the Second World War.

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