

India's Freedom Fighters in Southeast Asia

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Introduction

In the struggle for India's freedom, little is known about the contributions of the Indians of Southeast Asia. India's struggle has primarily been projected as a non-violent one under the leadership of the Congress party. While undoubtedly the Congress was an umbrella party of the struggle for freedom under Mahatma Gandhi, within India, little is known about the heroic efforts outside India. Subhash Chandra Bose popularly known as Netaji (leader), escaped house arrest and took over the leadership of the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army. With Japanese support, he led the Indian National army across the Indo-Burma border where they hoisted the Indian flag, in Moirang, Manipur. As the Japanese lost the war and Netaji himself died in a "mysterious air-crash" which is still being investigated at the time of writing, the British re-occupied both Malaya and Burma. The Indians who remained there chose to destroy their documents and had to remain quiet about their patriotic endeavours. It was therefore imperative to record oral testimonies of the surviving Indian freedom fighters to recover a lost chapter in Indian history. This also has been the last chance to record them, as the surviving freedom fighters are old and flickering like candlelight. The memories of the living suffuse the narrative of the making of the Indian nation with a rich texture and a personalised tone.

Historical Background

In 1939, the Viceroy declared war on India's behalf without consulting Indian politicians. Outrage at this moment did not spark a new civil disobedience movement. Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the two dominant leaders of the Congress, counselled caution. Subhash Chandra however, demanded an immediate civil disobedience movement against the British. Gandhi was opposed to this. Bose, who had been elected the Congress President for the third time had earlier been forced to resign. He was arrested by the British for the eleventh time. He launched a hunger strike and as his health whittled away, he was put under house arrest. On the night of 16th January 1941, Bose, disguised as an elderly Bengali gentleman, was whisked away by his young nephew, Sisir Kumar Bose. His nephew describes the escape: "Uncle told me towards the end that he was taking a plunge into an uncertain future and as many as twenty years might pass before he could return home" (Bose 1975: 24). "As we moved closer to the Gomoh railway station the road became difficult. 'I am off, you go back' was all he said at the end. I stood motionless and speechless" (Bose 1975: 38).

A few weeks later, Bose surfaced in Kabul where he made contact with the German legation. Using the alias Orlando Mazotta, Bose passed through Moscow and came to Berlin. In Germany he established a Free India Centre and raised an Indian Legion by recruiting from among the Indian prisoners of war (Netaji and Burma: 3).

Singapore fell to the Japanese on 15th February 1942. On 12th August 1942, an estimated 125,000 people gathered at Farrer Park in Singapore to hear Rash Behari Bose announce: "Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru, Azad and other leaders are arrested. The real fight for Indian freedom has begun"

(Syonan Times, 13 August 1942). The Indian Independence League had its conference in Bangkok in May 1942 and had taken the political initiative to unify the scattered leadership of the overseas Indians in East and South-east Asia. Rash Behari Bose was chairman of the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army. He was also a revolutionary wanted in the attempted assassination of Viceroy Hardinge in 1912 and the Delhi Conspiracy case of 1915 (Bayley and Harper 2004). He had fled to Tokyo and married a Japanese woman. It was Rash Behari Bose, then with failing health, who handed over the leadership to Subhash Chandra “Netaji” Bose, who arrived in Tokyo via a submarine from Germany.

Netaji announced the Provisional Government of Free India (Azad Hind) in Singapore on 21 October 1943, with a Council of Ministers and with himself as head of state. One of the ministers was Dr. Lakshmi Swaminathan (now Sahgal) who was head of the Women’s Organisation and given the task of raising a military regiment consisting entirely of women. It was called the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, after the Rani (Queen) of Jhansi who died on the battlefield during India’s first war of independence. Netaji was inspired by the memoirs of General Rose, the British general who had killed her in action. He wrote: “If there were a thousand men as brave as her (Rani of Jhansi), the British would never have been able to conquer India” (Lakshmi Sahgal, interview). Lakshmi Sahgal proudly recalls, “The regiment we raised was not of a thousand, but of a thousand five hundred women” (Lakshmi Sahgal, in the film “Asli Azaadi”). This was intended to be a fighting force and the women were put through rigorous training and then sent to Burma.

The Rani Jhansi Regiment

My first visit was to Janaki Thevar, the woman who commanded the Rani Jhansi Regiment, in Rangoon. A diminutive woman, now limping after a stroke and half-blind with cataract, awaited me anxiously at the porch of her bungalow in Titiwangsa. It was hard to imagine the lithe figure in military clothes. Puan Sri Janaki Thevar Nahappan, (Puan Sri is an honorific title), was delighted that I had come from India “to find out about *her* Ranis.”

Janaki Thevar (extract from oral testimony recorded): *When we reached Kamayut camp, we were met by a Lt. Mrs Chandran, one of the local Rani of Jhansi regiment in Rangoon. Netaji met me and told me that I would be commanding the regiment, with Miss Protima Sen as my adjutant. So I became the Commandant of the camp in Rangoon itself. The routine was to get up in the morning, PT exercises and training all the time.... Netaji said, we should get severe training to go to the jungle.... So the fifty nurses used to go by lorry and I on horse-back, give the instructions and then come back by horse-back...we had vigorous training; firing the tommy gun, machine gun, then run up and down the hill, throw hand grenades, take out the pin and throw the grenade down the hill.... Everyday the B12 bombers were roaming around...we could not go out...had to remain in the camp. When the Rangoon hospital was bombed, we were rushed to the hospital to help the wounded. I saw them all burnt their eyes (she breaks down and cries now) it was terrible, I saw such terrible things, the tar bombing was terrible and when we removed them, they were crying with pain...quite a number of people died, so a makeshift shelter was made on Helpin Road. I felt more angry with the British like anything, (continues crying) the carpet bombing was terrible....*

Things were getting bad, the soldiers were fighting in Arrakkan and Imphal, we had hoisted our flag in Moirang, but things were getting bad, the Japanese could not provide any more weapons, so Netaji decided we had to retreat. All of us protested, mainly all the girls said, “Netaji we don't want to go!” but Netaji said, “You have to go! My duty is to send you back to your parents.” Those who were from Burma, their parents came and took them. We were from Malaysia, so Netaji said he

would provide transport.

A train was organised. The train was bombed so heavily it was burning! So we had to leave it, with all our things. We came back to our camp. Netaji said, "You haven't left yet?" We told him our train was bombed, so he said, "Are you prepared to walk?" We said, "Yes!" Walking from Rangoon to Bangkok, it took us twenty six nights!

The first group of girls who were in the wagon were bombed by the British. One was Stella the other Josephine, both died straight away! When the British re-occupied Malaysia, I was interrogated. They asked me, "Why did you join?" I said, "Because I want to fight the British." They (the British) used to take me in a jeep and keep me from morning to evening at the army headquarters. But they gave me food. Kept on harping on the point, "Why did you join?" I kept saying, "I wanted to fight the British." Only at the school, the principal was very nasty to me, so I could not rejoin my education. She said, "Oh, you went to fight for your country?" She was abusive, so I stopped going to school. Then I did my Senior Cambridge privately.

I joined the Women's Council in the Women's MIC movement (Malaysian Indian Congress). I was made a Senator because of my contribution to women. I served in Parliament for five years. I got two terms.

I don't think the Indian government has given due recognition to INA. I don't know why. Because of Netaji, not only India but the whole of South-east Asia got freedom.

Everyone asked me to meet Rasammah Bhopalan. She has been a school principal and is the head of several Christian organisations.

Rasammah (nee Navrattnam) Bhopalan: *The real impact occurred when Netaji came to my home-town in Ipoh and spoke. The Ipoh club padang (Malay for large park) was packed with young people, men, women, girls, older people.*

SC: When you joined the Rani Jhansi Regiment, you were only sixteen and this was the first women's military wing of the world. Was there any opposition to your joining it?

RB: *Oh yes, don't forget I was the youngest of six children, and my widowed mother thought this was a preposterous idea. She would have nothing to do with it! And my sister who was two years older, we tried all the tactics--sulking, crying, obstinacy, but mother would not budge! We made life miserable for ourselves and her. There was a great deal of opposition! (tone very emphatic)*

SC: Then how did you manage to join?

RB: *Oh, Capt Lakshmi (Lakshmi Swaminathan Sahgal) came to Ipoh. We told her we want to join but our mother was not agreeing. So she visited some homes and she came to our home. She proved to be the turning point. My mother, while she thought it was absolutely unimaginable that her two youngest daughters would prepare to go to war.... But Capt Lakshmi came and visited our home, and talked to mother. Our mother... signed the consent papers. We went first to Singapore, we had an official opening by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. There was pin drop silence, except for the occasional shouting of 'Inqalab Zindabad!' (Long Live the Revolution!) and 'Chalo Dilli!' (Let's go to Delhi!).*

Everything a soldier had to do, we did; night marches, swamp marches, everything. We were in Singapore for a year and we were a thousand girls, and there was another group in Bangkok and another in Burma.... There were members of the Rani Jhansi who were ready to be members of the 'jaan baaz,' a suicide squad, like a 'kaame gaaze.' There were about fifteen of us who volunteered to train.

We retreated, we went by train, and we marched by foot and by small boats, crossing rivers as the bridges were destroyed. On our route, we got shot (at) by fighters. Yes, two of our girls got shot. What were their names? One was Josephine and the other was Stella, maybe Stella. It was very, very sad. We took them and gave them a respectful burial and put flowers on the grave. And when we moved further, we were attacked by a plane, and that was quite serious. Even when we were in Rangoon, we had a hospital with big signs, and there was no military around for miles, and yet it was bombed. The bombing of the hospital by the Allies was a despicable act. On our way to Bangkok, we were machine gunned, but somehow as the good Lord would have it, we escaped. The INA officers escorted us, the Japanese soldiers behaved very well and there were no untoward problems.

I was interrogated.... I returned to the folds of my family from where I received an education. I retired as a head-mistress of a school and am the head of many, many women's organizations.

The island of Penang

I drove down cross-country in a car with another freedom fighter, down the bird-watching paradise of Malaysia until we reached the island of Penang. It was the oldest British settlement in Malaya, founded in 1786, and was the first of the imperial belevedres where the Europeans rested from the enervating effects of heat and humidity (Bayly and Harper 2004).

It was with a great deal of excitement, almost as if it were a treasure hunt, that I located a sweet little white house near the Penang Free School, the site of the original INA. There, tucked away with a swing on the porch and a rambutan tree at the back was a sunlit home with tropical paintings and a piano. There two sisters who had joined the Rani Jhansi Regiment, S. Dhanalakshmi and Anjaly Suppiah, lived.

SC: And how did you actually join the Rani Jhansi Regiment?

S. Dhannalakshmi: *Mrs Puniatchy came and told my father that if we joined the Ranis, the men in the British Indian army when they would see the women fighting from Malaysia, they would feel ashamed to serve under the British. And that is how we also got into it!*

SC: That is a remarkable perception - shame the men, by having the women fight! How old were you then?

SD: *I was fourteen.*

SC: Fourteen! But did your father agree?

SD: *No, he was very reluctant. He said no first, but Mrs Puniatchy used to come over and over again and persuade him. So he finally agreed, but he had two conditions. He said he would send not only*

one daughter, but all three so we could help each other and that we should join the nursing line and not the fighting line.

Anjaly was fourteen, I was fifteen, sorry not fourteen as I said earlier and my other sister, I would not like to mention her name, as she would not be happy. We went for training to Singapore and our commander was Lakshmi. When she went away to Burma, Janaki Thevar took over. It was quite nice, we really enjoyed the training. It was very disciplined and we learnt a lot by going to the camp.

I was in charge of visitors...I used to scrutinise the letters, some used to write "Mother is very ill." Since they were not allowed to take leave, I used to censor the letters.

SC: How? Did you go to Burma?

SD: *I was ready to go, very, very keen and had even got my kit, but I had an attack of appendicitis. So I had to stay on in Singapore, I was very disappointed. After the war, I was given the duty to take back the girls to Kuala Lumpur and Ipoh. So they gave me a truck with the Ranis.*

SC: After the war was over, how did you pick up the threads of life?

SD: *Well, we didn't tell anybody about it. We just kept quiet.*

SC: But a lot of the Rani's were interrogated?

SD: *We were not because we were underage, but my father was denied an increment and was not promoted.*

SC: What was he?

SD: *A chief clerk in the Customs Department.*

SC: So he paid the price of your involvement?

SD: (Nods.) *We talked only to those who were in it. We went back to school and did not talk about it to those who were not involved in it.*

SC: How did the experience transform you?

SD: *Before the training, we were very soft, afraid even to talk to my father. After that, we became very bold and went out to talk to anyone. Only those who went back to India got recognised for their contribution, the ones who stayed on in Malaysia and Singapore never got acknowledged.*

SC: Do you feel bitter about it?

SD: *No, (thinks and speaks very slowly) because I got my experiences, no woman would have ever got!"* (smiles radiantly)

Anjaly Suppiah: *We were in Waterloo Street camp in Singapore. We got really rigorous training.*

We used to walk for miles and miles and rifle shooting too. Some of us were given special training to go to India, shot guns, grenades, first aid. They put us in a different house altogether. Special people came to talk to us, special cook, everything was special.

SC: So was it a special unit?

AS: *Maybe we were intended to go to India, I really don't know. When INA was disbanded, it was difficult to accept the civilian life again. I became a bold, independent person, not like before. My desire was to serve, serve the cause.*

SC: Do you feel that the INA received its due share of recognition?

AS: *No, we are the forgotten soldiers (laughs but without a trace of bitterness).*

Singapore

I also went to Singapore, the origin of the Azad Hind Fauj. I walked past the long ornate Greek columns of the City Hall where Netaji had made his first speech announcing the INA, accompanied by General Tojo.

After walking through the myriad apartment complexes of this city-state, with its small and compact post-modern look, I arrived at the match-box apartment of Mrs Bhagyalakshmi, now Mrs Davies.

Mrs Bhagyalakshmi Davies: *I was born in Perak, 18h August 1926. My father came from South Africa and my father used to talk of Mahatma Gandhi.*

My stepmother wanted me to get married, I did not want to get married to some fellow I may not like. There was so much in the papers about the Rani Jhansi Regiment, I thought it is better to go and die for a good cause than to get married!

SC: Did you join the Rani Jhansi regiment as an escape route?

Mrs. BD: *Well, I thought it is better to die for a good cause than get married. I was sixteen. The military training was in the camp, rifle training, bren gun, marching etc. I went to Burma with seven nurses from Singapore. We were in Rangoon at the Kamayut camp. Then Dr Param came to take us to Maymeo. We stayed two days in Mandalay. It was a nursing station. Wounded soldiers came from the front-line, were sent to our hospital. Dr Lakshmi was in charge. We had no time for conversation; we nursed the wounded soldiers and in the afternoon we had to go for lectures.... Netaji walked with us, Shah Newaz, Japanese soldiers, at the back, INA men, soldiers...both sides shooting, shooting at us....*

We had no clothing, nothing. When we reached Bangkok, the IIL (Indian Independence League) people got some clothes stitched for us. I had two sisters who were in the INA also, I stayed with them. I got a job in a hospital and was working there for 32 years, I retired and get a pension from there. In the beginning I worked under the BMA British Military Administration, we did not talk about my Rani Jhansi Regiment. I kept my identity as a freedom fighter a secret; no reunion, no flaunting it.

I got married to a civilian, not an INA person. I don't know, I never mix with people, so I don't know. I was never honoured or recognised by the High Commission or anyone.

In a way we suffered, but it is a sweet remembrance we have, but no one ever appreciated. We from outside fighting for the independence of India. Netaji threw a party at Netaji's house by the sea, we did not know he was going to fly off, the next day he flew. The last dinner he gave the Rani of Jhansi, the ladies.

I don't regret even today...I am so grateful you came all the way to see me.

Back in Kuala Lumpur, I also met several other women freedom fighters including Anjali Punnuswami and Muniammah Rangaswamy. I met Anjali Punnuswamy, also a member of the Rani Jhansi Regiment, in Rangoon. She spoke neither English nor Hindi. She spoke only Tamil, so we communicated through an interpreter. Here was a girl who at the age eighteen had been fired by Netaji's call for freedom-- 'tum mujhe khooon do, mein tumhe azaadi doonga' (you give me blood and I will give you freedom). She had gone to Burma and undergone both hardship and military training. Yet when the cause was over, who looked after the needs or even the rights of these courageous young women? Anjali remained without an education. She worked as a helper in a hospital (a menial job) and has no savings. She does not get any pension or social security from either Malaysia of which she is a citizen or India as someone who fought for its freedom.

Anjali Punnuswami: *I don't have anybody. Please help me. I have no children, no job, no education and no pension, either from the Malaysian government or India.*

So does she regret having been a Rani?

AP: *I am happy that I sacrificed for the cause.*

My next meeting was with Muniammah Rangaswamy, also a member of the Rani Jhansi Regiment. Diminutive, frail and thin, wearing a sari and traditional high caste mark on her forehead, she told me:

Muniammah Rangaswamy: *I heard Netaji at the Selangor club. I got inspired and I joined him."*

SC: What kind of training did you receive?

MR: *Rifle training.*

SC: And after that?

MR: *After the war was over I came back and got married.*

SC: Did you study?

MR: *Only up to the fifth standard?*

SC: And did you work?

MR: *My husband did not allow me to work.*

SC: You went to fight the British and you ended up being controlled by your husband?

MR: *After I came back, I got married. I had to listen to my husband only.* (She says this rather plaintively.)

SC: Did you have any children?

MR: *Eleven children.*

SC: Eleven children. After rifle training you went ahead and got deluged by children?

MR: (She looks at me sorrowfully.) *I had no choice.*

Women Empowerment?

Undoubtedly, as the Rani Jhansi Regiment is the first female military wing in the world's military history, its members have made a major contribution. The three camps at Singapore, Rangoon and Bangkok had about fifteen hundred recruits and only a minority received nursing training, most received military training as documented above. In order to maintain a military appearance, Bose also thought the women should have their hair cut, and while this was made optional, ninety per cent of the women complied (Lakshmi Sahgal, interview. Cited in Forbes 1997). The oral testimonies of both Janaki Thevar and Rasammah Bhopalan reveal that there was imminent danger to their lives as proven in the deaths of two Ranis, Stella and Josephine. However, despite the setbacks, when they were asked to retreat, the Ranis signed a petition in blood, demanding to go to the front and fight (Gauri Sen in "Asli Azaadi").

And yet, after the war was over, members of the first all women's military wing were pushed into traditional stereotyped roles that did not allow them to be agents of change. Instead some of them became victims of circumstance. I went away feeling that these heroic women had been used and then discarded conveniently. Those who had family backing, received an education. Janaki Thevar, went on to become a Senator and Rasammah Bhopalan a headmistress of a school. Even those like Anjali Suppiah talked about their experiences as something not available to other women. But the aftermath for Muniammah who had eleven children and Anjali Punnuswamy are distressing. The movement seemed to have harnessed the women's creative energies but ignored the individual itself.

No organisation looked after the welfare and well-being of the less privileged women freedom fighters. By not honouring them we too had lost a historic opportunity to have indigenous role models. The actual practitioners of women's empowerment in as early as the forties were the Rani Jhansi Regiment.

Military might or raising consciousness?

One of the interesting facets of the Indian struggle for freedom is that it has myriad forms of expression, some of which have been air-brushed from history. Netaji's much publicised falling out with Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru did not exactly endear him to the Congress Party. His departure from the Congress Party where he had been elected President thrice and his forming the Forward Bloc were seen as acts of rebellion and divisiveness. The party that came to power after independence found it politically convenient to forget the contribution of the Indians based in Southeast Asia. Bayly and Harper refer to the INA as “the ghost at the feast in Prime Minister Nehru’s independent and non-aligned India” (Bayly and Harper 2004: xxx). This project therefore has an element of recovery, a sense of remembering what had been conveniently forgotten.

The Indian National Army had an intricate structure. At the apex was the Provisional Government of Free India with Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose at its head, aided by a council of Ministers. There was the Indian Independence League, the civilian and organisational wing that collected funds and resources as well as mobilized volunteers. The Indian National Army or Azad Hind Fauj comprised of officers and soldiers. Then there were the Tokyo Cadets, a special group sent to Tokyo to train as officers of the INA. There was the Balak Sena which consisted of children and those too young to join the INA who were training till they came of age.

However, what was remarkable was Bose’s vision. In an oral testimony, Abdealli K. Motiwalla recalls that “Subhas Bose actually told us that ‘these handful of men, which I have selected in Singapore are not going to conquer India.... My purpose out of these say about hundred or 200,000 men, if (they)entered India, they are on their own. They are their own commanders. What their duty is to transfer this British Indian Army in India to rebellion.’ So he said if a quarter of a million rise, we can conquer. That was his motive, his purpose”(Abdealli K. Motiwalla, oral testimony).

I flew to Bangkok to meet some of the Indians involved with the INA there. I met three old men, namely, Beant Singh Kukreja, Raj Kumar Sachdeva and Kishen Lal Matta. Beant Singh Kukreja talked about the work that was done secretly by his brother Trilochan Singh and others, “which was to covertly travel to Malaya and convince officers in the army in Malaya, not to fight against India” (Beant Singh Kukreja, interview).

Both Beant Singh Kukreja and Kishen Lal Matta were in the Balak Sena (young people’s wing). Beant Singh Kukreja recalled how he and his brother “wrote pamphlets, secretly went to the camps and urged those in the British-Indian army, not to back the British army, to fight for India’s freedom. Do not fight in Malaya and Indo-China to enslave others....” (Beant Singh Kukreja, interview). Although he raised an army, Bose’s vision was to subvert the might of the British Empire by raising consciousness within the British-Indian army.

The Tokyo cadets

Mr Gandhi Nathan was a Tokyo cadet, one of the boys that Netaji regarded as "my sons." The Tokyo cadets were meant to train in Japan and return as officers of the Indian National Army. This was in response to the Sandhurst training officers in the British-Indian army undergo.

Gandhi Nathan: *I was born in Tamil Nadu, India in 1922 and came to Malaya at the age of twelve. I*

was teaching in a Tamil school and then in June 1943 Netaji arrived in Singapore. This was the famous meeting in Cathay Hall.

SC: Why did you go there?

GN: *We were all young people, inspired people, and we had all heard of Netaji. He had started the Forward Bloc, breaking away from the Congress. As young men we were all interested to know what was happening in India. His speeches were so inspiring and I had read about him even before the war, so when I heard he was coming, I was keen to see and hear him.*

SC: Tell me about that day!

GN: *Well, Rash Behari Bose, the leader of the Indians in South-east Asia, handed over the leadership of the Indian Independence League to Netaji, that day at the Cathay cinema hall. Everyone was in an extremely joyous mood. Netaji, after taking over the leadership, made an extremely inspiring speech; he said he had dedicated his entire life to the freedom struggle, he urged all young men to join the Indian National Army and come to the Indo-Burma front.*

SC: But his slogan 'tum mujhe khoon do, mein tumhe azaadi doong' (you give me blood and I will give you freedom), did it not scare you to be asked to give your own blood?

GN: *No, we were in a very heroic mood, we were not scared of giving up our lives at that age. The whole cinema hall was full, many were unable to go inside, there could be five, six hundred people.*

SC: So did you join then?

GN: *There was a public rally at the Singapore Municipal Building facing the esplanade on the 9th of June 1943. Netaji appeared in public and called upon all Indians to join the Indian National Army so we can wage a final battle against the British.*

SC: And your father signed the consent papers.

GN: *My father had passed away by then, but I was staying at the Ramakrishan Mission boarding school, and I had to seek the permission of the swami. Well, everyone was in a patriotic mood at that time. (Laughs)*

SC: Can you tell us about your journey to Tokyo? I believe you were attacked and at least one of the cadets was killed.

GN: *I was first put in a training school called Azad school, Netaji wanted to select some young men, with knowledge of Japanese to get advanced military training. I was reluctant to go to Japan, I wanted to go to the battlefield. Col. Ehsan Qadr, in charge of the training, said, "Young man, you too will go to the battle front afterwards." So Netaji called the applicants and personally interviewed them and chose thirty-five cadets for the training. He handpicked us, checking our education, motivation and knowledge of the freedom struggle. After three months of training, we were put into a ship and sent to Japan with a detour that took more than four weeks of voyaging. Another batch of ten cadets for the Air Force was struck by a torpaedo of an American warship. One of the cadets, Bishen Singh, died, the other nine who hanged on to a life raft were saved. They joined us at the preparatory school. We learned army tactics, Japanese language, over six months*

period. As soon as we reached, Japan we wrote individual letters to Netaji and he replied to each of us, individually.

SC: Do you have them?

GN: *No, (sadly) because I left Japan under chaotic conditions....*

SC: What did he write?

GN: *He said I don't have a son of my own, but you are to me more than a son, because you have dedicated your life for the freedom of Bharat Mata, (Mother India) which is the goal of my life. He came once to Tokyo, he came to each and every room of the cadets, (asking) are you happy, any message to your parents? He had lunch with us ! Saw our training and he was extremely happy. He came again, too....*

The British made arrangements to send us back to India instead of Singapore, so we were in prison for two months in Stanley Prison and then we sailed to Chennai (Madras). We were taken to an army camp for about ten days. The journey was about ten days from Hongkong to reach Madras. We had no hope at all, we thought they might just finish us off....

SC: Did you ever have second thoughts?

GN: *No, we never had second thoughts.... In Chennai, we were first interrogated by Criminal Investigation Officers. They took a statement from us. But they told us your INA movement is very popular here.*

This is January 1946. The Congress people came inside the army camp and organized a reception for us at the Woodlands Hotel. They made arrangements for us to go back to our homes, those who did not have any place to go were sent to Calcutta. I went to my hometown. We were all keen to join the Dehra Dun Military academy, but we were denied admission into the Academy. Also, Pandit Nehru said that the Indian men should not be taken back into the Indian army.

SC: But you were a civilian who became a Tokyo cadet for the sake of India's freedom.

GN: *Jawaharlal Nehru didn't think so, he just loathed Subhash Chandra Bose.*

SC: So after fighting for India's independence, why did you not stay on in India?

GN: *I wanted to very much, but I just couldn't find a job.*

Patriots or Prisoners?

Several critics of the INA have called them "traitors" as some of them were prisoners of war taken by the Japanese and then given a choice to join the INA. It is often asked if they were really freedom fighters. However, as Gandhi Nathan, Janaki Thevar and those who gave the above testimonies show, there were civilians who joined the cause of freeing India. It is Bose's charismatic personality and mesmerising speeches, "tum mujhe khoo do, mein tumhe azaadi doonga" (you give me blood and I will give you freedom), that inspired young girls like Rasammah Bhopalan to volunteer for the first all women's military wing. One must note that during the 1940's, most women

in India had their movements circumscribed by the family and it is Bose's vision to galvanise so much creative energy and commitment.

Post-war scenario

After the Second World War, the INA members were taken prisoners and after interrogation, categorised as black, grey or white, according to their level of involvement. These included both men and women. A confidential document of the British Military Administration "estimated that there are between 15000 and 20,000 INA in Malaya, of which 75% are civilians...in evacuating all these from Malaya, considerable amount of shipping space would be taken up and later it would be necessary to ship them back for labour...many in all probability will be 'White' and no source of danger to security...it is decided to only evacuate ex-members of the Indian Army who have joined the INA to India (Security and Intelligence, Policy and Treatment of Suspected Persons in Malaya, confidential file). There was after India achieved independence. Gandhi Nathan's oral testimony proves that despite his best efforts he was unable to find a job in India. In effect, the Indian freedom fighters in Malaysia have received neither recognition (with the exception of Janaki Thevar who got a Padma Shri, one of the highest civilian honours from the Indian government in 2000) nor any monetary compensation from the Indian or Malaysian government.

Burma: Why are the Indians so poor?

The route to Chinnaya's house is a narrow two-foot wide lane which was waterlogged, clogged with garbage, broken bits of glass, steel and other waste materials. Amidst the terrible stench of urine and defecation, broken bits of brick are placed strategically so one can walk through the dirty water without getting wet. The stretch is about ten to fifteen feet. The hovel, a sort of thatched roof put together with broken tin cans and discarded things like rubber tyres, is the home of India's freedom fighter, Chinnaya.

Toothless, with a thin, watery film clouding his white unseeing eyes, thin as a reed, in a dirty lyongi, the colour of which I cannot make out, on the floor is one of India's freedom fighters.

SC: Where were you born?

Chinnaya: *In Ramanath in Tamil Nadu in 1928.*

SC: And how did you come to Burma?

Chinnaya: *With my parents (his eyes look above my head, as if lost in time.)*

SC: And how did you join the INA?

Chinnaya: *Well, there was a call for freedom. I just joined. My job was to carry the injured to hospital.*

SC: (I looked around the hut.) Do you regret you sacrificed?

Chinnaya: *I feel happy I could do something for my motherland.*

SC: How do you live?"

Chinnaya: *My son is a school-teacher and he supports me and my wife.*

Then he shows me a document which on close examination has the words FRC – Foreigners Registration Certificate.

SC: What is this? Are you not a citizen of Burma?

Chinnaya: *No, we are not citizens of Myanmar, we are foreigners and we have to get this renewed every year.*

I learned that those on the FRC cannot have a proper job, buy property or even travel from their place of residence within Burma without getting permission from the Ministry of Immigration. Chinnaya clutches the document which is carefully preserved in plastic. As I question him closely, I find out that he who has been in Burma for over sixty years and his son who is born here, are "foreigners." It strikes me as a cruel violation of human rights that a man who fought for the creation of the Indian nation state is himself stateless. Chinnaya sings the national anthem of the Indian National Army, "sukh chain kee barsha barkhe..." (may peace and prosperity be showered on my motherland) and it brings tears to my eyes. I rush away, grateful for the moment that he is blind and cannot see my tears of shame and anger.

One treasure leads me to another and I land at Lt. Perumal's place in the predominantly Indian area. It is also poor but not in such a perilous condition as Chinnaya's. Perumal has a kindly face. He wears a white shirt and a traditional lyongi and is educated. He speaks to me in a mixture of Hindi and English. Curious grandchildren look at who has "come from India."

Perumal: *I was born in Rangoon, in the Kambe area, in 1928. I joined the freedom struggle for my country – 'hamra desh ke vaste' (for sake of motherland, my country), 'azaadi ke vasste' (for the sake of freedom).*

At first we were too young, so we just got training at Kambe Chettiyar High School.

SC: Was it military training?

Perumal: *Yes, it was military training. After that I joined the propaganda department, we had to go from house to house and persuade mothers to send their children for the cause. And then I joined the Azad Hind Bank as a collector. My job was to collect bills, money for the cause, donations. Some gave a few paise, some a few hundred and more...and in the end we had 45 crore rupees. I never went to the front...after the Japanese lost the war, I stayed on here because my parents, children, everyone was here.... I was captured by the British and kept in Rangoon jail...we were marching down Kokayan road when the British military surrounded us in a jeep and captured twenty six people.... I was one of them and we were kept in jail...they knocked us up a bit, but fed us, but when they questioned us they brought a stick, saying what do you mean by joining the INA... then released us after a month.*

SC: What were your experiences within the INA?

Perumal: *I was part of the Gandhi brigade, we had to do military training. Jeevan Singh was our Commander and in Nadar Sangam was our head office. We go off to see the Nadar building which was the INA head office.*

I ask Perumal, since he is born in Burma, he must naturally be a citizen.

Perumal: *I am not a citizen of any country, I applied in 1951 and again in 196. Till now I am not a citizen, nor are my children or grandchildren... this is extremely tragic for the young ones, my grand daughter is in the eighth standard, because they cannot go to college without citizenship. I want the Indian government to help us get citizenship! We have to pay Rs. 50 per person to get the FRC renewed and I have eight grandchildren. The Indian government does not help us as INA personnel or as freedom fighters, we do not get even a paise as pension from the Indian government nor citizenship from the Burmese government.*

SC: So have you received any response to your letters from India?

Perumal: *Yes, The INA committee said, "You have to be a citizen of India to receive a pension." I am a citizen of no country.*

I am struck by the irony of it all. Here is a man who collected funds for the cause and spent a month in Rangoon jail, and here he lies without citizenship of either country!

Perumal: *Not only that, we really want to teach our children their mother tongue. We want them to read Tamil, but the Indian embassy has stopped the supply of free Tamil newspapers and magazines, something we can ill afford to buy with our meagre incomes. Our children do not even know what is happening in modern India, do not know their language.... Earlier, we used to get it, but this has been stopped now.*

SC: So are you saying you get neither citizenship, ex-gratia payment, pension or even a newspaper?

Perumal: *Yes, we get nothing.* (Now a shadow crosses his face.)

Maymeo

D. R Sharma: *I was born in Pyay Oo Lwin in 1925. I was politically minded, you know.... I felt for India.... All my people were there at that time and I joined the Swaraj Young Men's Training Institute.... We were the first batch.*

SC: How many boys joined from Maymeo?

DRS: *Seven, eight boys, we were all very idealistic. I was eighteen then.*

SC: Did you get paid?

DRS: *No, no, we only got food to eat and some allowance for toiletries.*

SC: How did you end up at the Arrakkan front?

DRS: *We were SYTI students and it was under the Indian Independence League. They attached us to the Japanese army. To do propaganda, we made contact with the British Indian army at the border and told them about the Indian National Army, to make them feel for us.*

SC: Did you meet anyone of the British Indian army?

DRS: *Yes, we met! We met several surrendered personnel and some prisoners. We met them and told them about Subhash Chandra Bose and our movements.*

SC: How long were you at the Arrakan front?

DRS: *For two years, from '43 and '44. I feel very proud (softly) I feel I want to cry now (starts crying) all those leaders and what we did then... they were tried in Red Fort.... When I die also, I will feel very proud of what I did. I didn't work for money, but I learnt that they were providing a tambapatra (certificate of honour) I wanted one to hang up there (points towards the wall) so that my grandchildren would say, see my grandfather he did work for the cause of India.*

Conclusion

The contribution of the Indian freedom fighters in Southeast Asia has been remarkable, both from an individual perspective of patriotism as well as from what is seen in the vision of their leader, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. However, this contribution has gone largely unrecognised by India for political reasons. It is important that the government of India address this by honouring a few of the remaining freedom fighters and by asking the Myanmar government to grant citizenship to the Indians in Myanmar, failing which India should offer them citizenship.

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