

# THE INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY AND ITS TRYST WITH SUBMARINES

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In Indian history, the activities of Indian National Army (INA), formed by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, are an important and inalienable part of Indian freedom movement. It is commonly known that during World War II, the INA fought against the Allied forces in South East Asia, in conjunction with the Imperial Japanese forces, whose strategic objective was to invade British India from the easterly axis, through Burma (now Myanmar). Though it made rapid advances through Burma, INA ultimately did not succeed in its mission, and had to face severe reverses on the battlefields of Imphal and Kohima, in April and May 1944. However, behind the INA's unsuccessful yet heroic struggle on land, there is a lesser known maritime dimension, involving submarines. This article attempts to bring forth aspects of INA's tryst with submarines during World War II. The first concerns Netaji's epic submarine journey from Germany to Japanese controlled Sabang, off Sumatra. The second aspect relates to deployment of INA personnel by use of submarines, for

clandestine and subversive activities against British government in India. The third touches upon interception of a ship carrying officer cadets of the INA by a submarine. However, prior discussing these aspects, a brief background of Netaji's military efforts would be in order.

## **Background**

As Indian nationalism against British rule steadily gained momentum in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Subhas Chandra Bose emerged as a prominent and popular young leader of the Indian National Congress. He devoted himself completely to the freedom movement after resigning as a probationer of the Indian Civil Service in 1921, while studying at Cambridge University in Britain . He was jailed eleven times in the period 1921-1940, and was also compelled to go on exile to Europe for three years (1933-36) by the British government, to thwart his revolutionary activities. Bose became the President of All India Congress Committee in 1938. However, following irreconcilable ideological

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differences with some Congress leaders, he resigned from the party in 1940 and decided to go on his own. He formed the All India Forward Bloc Conference, based on a revolutionary ideology, pushing for Hindu-Muslim unity, communal harmony and armed struggle against the British. His activities, which had been under watch for years, further antagonised the British and he was arrested on 02 July 1940 on sedition charges. In January 1941, while under house arrest at Kolkata, he dramatically escaped to Afghanistan, with an alias identity 'Muhammad Ziauddin'. In Afghanistan, Bose sought Italian assistance to ultimately reach Europe disguised as an Italian gentleman 'Orlando Mazzotta'. In Europe, he established the Free India Center and Indian Legion (later Azad Hind Fauj), with German assistance. Many Indian exiles, including ACN Nambiar, Abid Hassan, NG Ganpuley, KM Bhatt, MR Vyas, PB Sharma, Promode Sengupta, Girija Mokerjee and others were drawn to his movement. He came to be addressed by the honorific title 'Netaji'

by his followers. Interestingly, the greeting 'Jai Hind', which is now commonly used in our Armed Forces, was first used in Netaji's Indian Legion.<sup>1</sup> This is also true for "Jana Gana Mana" as the national anthem. While in Europe, during 1941-42, Bose made repeated attempts to convince German government and the Tripartite powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) to facilitate his relocation to East Asia, so that he could direct and coordinate revolutionary and military actions against the British government in India. The Three (Axis) Powers' Military Agreement of 19 January 1942, included a Japanese proposal for deployment of German U-boats in the Indian Ocean, with the 70th meridian of longitude as the operational boundary between the German and Japanese sides.<sup>2</sup> Four months later, on 29 May 1942, in the only meeting Bose had with Hitler, the Fuhrer offered to "place a German submarine at his disposal, which would take him to Bangkok". This set the stage for Bose's eventual epic underwater journey from Europe to East Asia.

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<sup>1</sup>Sugata Bose, "The terrible price of freedom", *His Majesty's Opponent, Subhas Chandra Bose and India's struggle against the Empire*. p 211.

<sup>2</sup>Kapitaen sur See Kurt Freiwald, ex-German Navy, ONI review, published by the office of naval intelligence, *German U boats in the Indian Ocean*. <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Germany/KM/IndianOcean/index.html>

### Bose's U-Boat Journey<sup>3</sup>

By mid-January 1943, the plan for Bose's submarine voyage to Asia was finalised. On 8th February 1943, Bose left Berlin by train for Kiel accompanied by his adjutant, Abid Hassan. From there they boarded German submarine U-180. Bose's journey was kept top secret and except a few people concerned, nobody knew about his departure from Germany. Bose's journey by U-180 was first ever human transportation of that kind, where an important political leader had been offered a submarine passage to a distant territory. The cramped living spaces in the submarine were a new experience to Bose and Abid Hassan. It was like solitary confinement and Bose started losing weight. The submarine was filled with the smell of diesel oil. Another problem faced by Bose during his journey was regarding food. Only

beef or ham was available as food, and that too smelled of diesel. There was a bag of rice and some lentils with which kichree was made by Abid Hassan for a change. Notwithstanding these challenges, Bose utilized the time in dictating and completing revisions of a new edition of his journal *The Indian Struggle*. He also dictated or wrote the speeches that he would later deliver to soldiers of INA and his supporters. During the passage of U-180, the submarine refueled from a U-tanker off Spain, torpedoed a British merchant ship SS Corbis off West African coast, on 18 April 1943, and a couple of days later, had a narrow escape from being rammed by a cargo vessel. The culminating and most remarkable event in the journey was the rendezvous of the German and Japanese submarines in the Indian Ocean, some 400 nautical miles off the coast of Madagascar, after 77 days.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Sugata Bose, "The terrible price of freedom", *His Majesty's Opponent, Subhas Chandra Bose and India's struggle against the Empire*. pp 232-237. Also see Thakur, Bithin, *Strategy of Subhas Chandra Bose in the freedom struggle of India with reference to his alliance with the Axis Powers (1897-1945)*. Thesis submitted at University of Pondicherry, Department of History, 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/5299> Chapter V - Bose's Armed Struggle in Southeast Asia and the INA Trials.

<sup>4</sup>One reason why German U-boat operations in the Indian Ocean were at first restricted to the area between Capetown and Madagascar was that the long-range Type IX D U-boats and U-boat tankers were not ready for operations at that time. The second important reason was that the German U-boats had no bases in the Indian Ocean area. Japan certainly took a long time to grant the Germans the bases which they requested, but this was not because the Japanese Navy did not welcome German U-boats in the Indian Ocean; in fact they had themselves suggested a strong representation of U-boats in building up her position, as a sea power in this area and, as the base facilities were limited, she needed them all for herself. See Kapitän zur See Kurt Friewald, ex-German Navy, ONI review, published by the office of naval intelligence, 'German U boats in the Indian Ocean'. <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Germany/KM/IndianOcean/index.html>.

### **Mid-Sea Submarine Transfer of Subhas Chandra Bose**

On 26 April 1943, the Japanese submarine I-29, commanded by Captain Mesao Teraoka, arrived in the Mozambique Channel, near neutral Portuguese territory. Six days earlier it had left Penang amidst tight security and ostensibly on a routine mission hunting enemy ships. In fact locals, many of them Indians, had been intrigued to see Teraoka, a submarine flotilla commander, take charge of the boat and were convinced something was afoot when they learnt that the ship's cooks had been busy buying spices for Indian curries. Long before the I-29 arrived in Portuguese waters, rumours had circulated throughout Penang that the man they had long heard about was about to arrive. Fortunately for Bose, these rumours did not reach the British. It was only when the ship reached its destination that Captain Teraoka told his crew that their mission was to fetch Bose. I-29 also carried with her two Japanese passengers, whose purpose was to go to Germany and observe the technique of U-boat construction. In addition the

Japanese submarine was carrying two kaiten (manned torpedoes) and secret information about Japanese torpedoes, along with two boxes of gold, intended for the Japanese embassy at Berlin.<sup>5</sup> The I-29 had arrived in the Mozambique Channel some ten hours ahead of schedule and it was only on the evening of 26<sup>th</sup> April that the Japanese sighted the U- Boat. In the enveloping darkness, transfer was impossible and with both submarines required to maintain strict radio silence, there could not even be any radio communication. Sunrise on 27<sup>th</sup> April brought fresh problems: the seas were now so rough that the two boats could not even get near one another. All they could do was circle each other and wait for the weather to get better. In the evening, as the sun was about to set, the Japanese officers saw two men jump overboard from the German vessel and swim towards them. Quickly hauled on board by the Japanese, they turned out to be a German officer and signals man. The reason for their daredevilry was quickly made clear. The U-boat was low on fuel and could not carry on any longer. As day dawned on 28<sup>th</sup> April the sea was still rough, but it was decided

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<sup>5</sup>Carl Boyd, Akihiko Yoshida 'Indian Ocean in early 1943' in *The Japanese Submarine Force and World War II*, pp 116-117.

that the exchange must take place. The two Germans, on a rubber raft, dragged a strong Manila hemp rope back to their boat. Bose and Hasan boarded the raft, clung to the rope and were literally hauled into the I-29.<sup>6</sup> The submarine started its return voyage. The mortality rate on German U-boats was more than eighty percent and the risk had been immense.<sup>7</sup> The German officers and crew had been friendly with Bose throughout the arduous journey, in the most cramped conditions. Yet on boarding the Japanese submarine I-29, Bose and Hassan felt something akin to a home coming. The flotilla commander, Masao Teraoka, vacated his cabin for Bose. Bose could not have timed his arrival better. The captain of the submarine, Juichi Izu, organised a party on 29<sup>th</sup> April as the Japanese celebrated the emperor's birthday and for the successful transfer of Bose. Bose and Hassan felt they had come back to an Asian nation. The transition from the unpalatable German diet was a great relief, but Bose was not yet used

to four meals a day. When the Japanese kept insisting, he asked, "...do we have to eat again, Captain Teraoka??" with a smile as he was overwhelmed with their hospitality. The Japanese submarine I-29 passed to the South of India on its way to Southeast Asia outside the British patrolling radius. It picked up a radio message from Penang instructing a detour to Sabang, on the northern Sumatra coast. On 06<sup>th</sup> May 1943, the I-29 was safely docked in the harbour at Sabang. Before disembarking, Bose posed for a photograph with the entire crew of the I-29. He autographed this picture with a heartfelt message, "*It was great pleasure to sail aboard this submarine. I believe this will mark a milestone in our fight for victory and peace*". Bose's friend Colonel Yamamoto, whom he had met earlier in Germany, was present on the pier to greet him at Sabang. Netaji was finally on Asian soil to lead his struggle for Indian independence. Rest as they say, is history.

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<sup>6</sup>Thakur, Bithin, *Strategy of Subhas Chandra Bose in the freedom struggle of India with reference to his alliance with the Axis Powers (1897-1945)*. Thesis submitted at University of Pondicherry, Department of History, 2011, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/5299> Chapter V - Bose's Armed Struggle in Southeast Asia and the INA Trials.

<sup>7</sup>The Germans sent 45 U-boats at various times to operate in the Indian Ocean. Of these, 34 boats were lost; 4 were interned by the Japanese; 3 surrendered and only 4 returned to their home ports. Kapitän zur See Kurt Freiwald, ex-German Navy, ONI review, published by the office of naval intelligence, 'German U boats in the Indian Ocean'. <http://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/Germany/KM/IndianOcean/index.html>.

### **Setting the Stage for Armed Struggle**

After his arrival at Sabang, Bose took the salute in Singapore as the Supreme Commander of the Indian National Army on 05 July 1943, described by him as “the proudest day of his life”. Later, Bose flew to Tokyo to garner support for his armed struggle and Japanese recognition of Indian independence. Following his meetings with Prime Minister Tojo, he was assured of Japan’s support to his cause. The Provisional government Azad Hind was proclaimed on 21 October 1943. In early November 1943, he visited Japan again, for attending the Greater East Asia Conference, where he made a very impressive speech. In his parleys with his Japanese interlocutors, he put in requests for equipment to build a navy and an air force. Upon his return to Singapore in end November, he plunged in the final preparations for INA’s march towards India. In late December 1943, the Japanese handed over the administrative control of Andaman and Nicobar islands to Bose’s Provincial Government.

### **Submarine launched Intelligence Operations of the INA**

To progress his military plans, Bose had to contend with the Japanese liaison office Hikari Kikan, which was responsible for Japanese relations with the Azad Hind Government. It recruited Sri Lankans, Indians and other South Asians domiciled in Malaya and Singapore for spying missions against the Allies. Japanese attempts at espionage inside India, using Indian agents in Malaya, had mostly failed.<sup>8</sup> On Bose’s arrival, he had tried to assert control over intelligence operations based in Penang and Rangoon, and put NG Swami in charge of an intelligence school called the Azad School. In March 1943, four well-trained intelligence operatives – Bhagwan Lu, Harbans Lal, Kanwal Singh, and Kartar Singh, accompanied Swami on the blockade runner S.S. Osorno. On 08 December 1943, Bose, Swami, and Hasan put these personnel together with another four trained in Penang, and dispatched this group of eight under the leadership of SN Chopra

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<sup>8</sup>Hugh Toye, *Subhas Chandra Bose: The Springing Tiger*, Mumbai: Jaico Publishing House, 2007, pp 137-138

toward India onboard a Japanese submarine, I-26. Submarine I-26 departed Penang on 04 December 1943 and landed twelve INA operatives (Hikari Kikan for the Japanese) southeast of Karachi on 21 December 1943, in an operation codenamed 'Operation Yo.'<sup>9</sup> The group landed with weapons, money, and sophisticated wireless equipment on the Kathiawar coast. They had been instructed to split into four pairs and head toward Bengal, the North West Frontier, the United Provinces, and Bombay. In January 1944, radio contact was successfully established between partisans in Calcutta and Bose in Burma. The group remained at large for less than two months.<sup>10</sup> On 07 January 1944, the advance headquarters of the Provisional Government were moved from Singapore to Rangoon. Tokyo approved plans for the offensive into India in end-January, and in early February 1944, ordered the commander of Japanese forces in northern Burma to launch the Imphal campaign. The strategic aims of the Japanese and the Indians were quite different. Japan saw the invasion as a

pre-emptive strike to forestall British attempts to reconquer Burma. The INA, on the other hand, saw its role as that of a catalyst against a civilian uprising against the British. The roles of the three special groups of INA, now brought to Burma in their entirety, were redefined. The Special service group 'Bahadur' would operate behind enemy lines, carrying out sabotage, espionage, and winning over Indian troops. The 'intelligence troops' would work similarly in the battle area and the reinforcement group would be in charge of political education of Indian prisoners in order to recruit them for INA. After the successful submarine insertion of December 1943, the I-26 landed another 10 revolutionaries of INA West of Karachi, in March 1944.<sup>11</sup> During 1941-43, there were many clandestine landings by Japanese submarines on Indian coastline. However, a number of 'inserted' INA and other Indian operatives of the Hikari Kikan were eventually captured in India and tried for treason. Satyendra Chandra Bardhan, Vakkom Abdul Khader Mohammad, Fouja Singh, Boniface Pereira, Anandan, Durgadas

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *The Springing Tiger Op Cit. p 139*

<sup>11</sup> Carl Boyd, Akihiko Yoshida "The Japanese Submarine Force and World War II – I-26 Japanese Submarine".  
<http://www.combinedfleet.com/I-26.htm>

Ray Chowdhury, Nanda Kumar Dey, Chittaranjan Mukherjee, Phani Bhusan Chakraborty, Sunil Kumar Mukherjee, Kalipada Aich, Nirendra Mohan Mukherjee, and Man Kumar Basu Thakur were sentenced to death and hanged at Madras Penitentiary, in September 1943.<sup>12</sup>

### **Cadets officers of INA - Victims of Submarine Warfare**

The final aspect of submarine connection of the INA concerns the 'Tokyo Cadets' - officer cadets of the INA, who were selected for officer training in Japan at the height of World War II. The cadets' journey to Japan was tragically cut short by the torpedoing of their Japanese passenger cum cargo ship, Ural Maru by a US submarine. On her last voyage, Ural Maru had departed Singapore bound for Takao in Taiwan and had called on Kuching and Miri in Japanese-occupied Sarawak, where she loaded Japanese wounded soldiers, nurses and other passengers. In addition there were ten unusual passengers – Indian National Army cadets of Indian origin

on their way to Japan for military training. Ural Maru was torpedoed and sunk on 27 September 1944 in the South China Sea by the American submarine USS Flasher (SS-249) approximately 150 nautical miles west of Luzon. The INA cadets on board the Ural Maru were mainly Malayas of Indian parentage, Narayanan, Bishan Singh, Navaratnam, Ghosh, Robert Prosper, Ranjit Das, Gandhi Das, Dutta, Bimol Deb and Ramesh S Benegal (Burmese of Indian parentage). Of them, Bishan Singh died during the episode. One of the survivors, late Air Commodore Ramesh S. Benegal, MVC, AVSM went on to become an officer in the Indian Air Force, in independent India. The first-person account of the sinking of the Ural Maru is provided in his book "Burma to Japan with Azad Hind - A War Memoir".<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The INA's heroic struggle was a key contributor to Indian freedom movement and though it suffered reverses on the battlefield, it brought

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<sup>12</sup>History – Martyrs of Indian Freedom, Martyrs of Indian National Army, [http://wbcorrectionalservices.gov.in/history\\_martyrs.html](http://wbcorrectionalservices.gov.in/history_martyrs.html) and <http://www.indianage.com/eventdate.php/Crime/10-September-1943>

<sup>13</sup>Benegal Ramesh, *Burma to Japan with Azad Hind: A War Memoir 1941 – 1944*, 2009



home the intensity of Indian nationalism to the British Empire in a manner that was never seen nor experienced before. Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, as a military leader and head of Indian Provisional government, had the opportunity to salute the Indian Tricolour at Port Blair, as a symbolic gesture of assertion of Indian control over a liberated territory.

While Netaji's endeavours continue to occupy popular imagination in the country, the maritime dimension of his movement, and particularly the association of INA with submarines, is relatively lesser known, and forms an interesting component of this fascinating enterprise cherished in Indian history as a proud chapter in the struggle for independence.



### ***About the Author***

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