

EPILOGUE

THE IMPACT OF INA ON POST-WAR MALAYA

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There is a popular impression that it was Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru who were responsible for India's independence from Britain on August 1947. However, such a perspective does not give credit to the role of Indian Independence Army (INA) headed by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in quickening the process of India's freedom. While Gandhi and Nehru were associated with passive resistance, Bose relied on a revolutionary/nationalist struggle from outside to expel the British from India. In recent years, it has come to the light that the fervour of Indian nationalism generated by the activities of the INA proved to be troublesome to the colonial authorities. The British did not fear peaceful protest marches, but the dangerous prospect of a rebellion amongst Indians in the service of the British Indian Army was a deep concern. When Atlee was asked about Gandhi's influence in the decision to grant independence to India, he remarked "minimal".

There is a feeling that present-day India might not have adequately recognized the role of the INA and specific role of Bose in the independence struggle. Bose's pursuit of a military strategy to defeat the British might not have endeared him to Indians who followed the path of Gandhi and the Congress Party. While the political rehabilitation of the INA and Bose

remains a controversial and heated issue in India, the INA left a powerful legacy in countries other than India. In Malaysia and Singapore, the total involvement of Indians in the INA greatly influenced and guided the nature of their post-war political, social, economic and cultural developments. It is often remarked in Southeast Asian academic circles that without an adequate historical understanding of the INA phenomenon, it would be difficult to fathom the complex nature of Indian community's post-war developments.

The INA created such an impact and lasting legacy as a result of the participation of thousands of Indians on the basis of a pan-Indian nationalism in Southeast Asia to free India from British colonialism. Lebra's study of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment provides a rare and an interesting glimpse into the efforts of Indian women who joined the Regiment, the women's wing of the INA, to realize the ambition of an independent India, free from the British rule.

By interviewing some former members of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment (those who lived in rubber estates) she provides an understanding of why women participated in the INA, why they joined the Rani of Jhansi Regiment, what happened in plantations during the Japanese occupation, the influence of Bose's ideas and finally, not least, what happened to them in the aftermath of the struggle. From the interviews, Lebra shows that Indian women genuinely participated in the liberation movement inspired by the radical ideas of Bose.

For the thousands of men and women, involvement in the INA was a positive experience. While they came from Burma dejected as result of the defeat, it was only a matter of time before they began to develop an interest in improving their lives in Malaya. With the return of the British, Indians made it known that they would not put up with the restoration of the old colonial order. Their experience in the INA exposed them to socialist ideology, military training, discipline, and above all imbued them with an acute sense of nationalism and anti-British sentiment. Michael Stenson writes of the INA camps as "filled with a ferment of ideas deriving not merely from the teachings of nationalist and revolutionary history or the inculcation of anti-imperialist attitudes but also from the spontaneous exchange of views about all sorts of political ideas from Dravidianism to socialism and communism" (Stenson 1980, pp. 96–97).

The Indian community's involvement in the cause of India's independence was an experience that gave them dignity, self-respect and the desire to improve themselves in the post-war years. As Stenson aptly puts it: "as hopes of an Indian liberation faded, thoughts turned to Malayan realities, to the struggle for survival and to specifically Malayan politics" (Stenson 1980, p. 100).

With the surrender of the Japanese and the emergence of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), more and more Indians joined communist-dominated organizations such as left-wing trade unions. For INA returnees, involvement in the activities of the left-wing organizations was not a contradiction. For the majority, the struggle against British imperialism was a continuation of the struggle first headed by the INA.

Indians long subservient to Europeans began to change under the influence of anti-Western nature of Indian nationalist ideology. Indians, having gone through the INA experience, were the most militant in challenging British rule in Malaya. The majority of left-wing union leaders were former members of the INA. According to Ramasamy, the independence movement was important in two respects. First, it created strong nationalist feelings amongst Indians of different classes and second, the experience gained in the INA was useful to Indians to improve their social and economic conditions in the post-war period (Ramasamy 1994, p. 60).

Apart from the objective of improving their economic situation, the INA experience was culturally rewarding for Indians in the post-war period. By participating in trade unions, Indians used their strength to establish Tamil schools in plantation and urban areas. The trade union involvement in Tamil schools forced the British in the post-war period to establish a system of inspectors to supervise the curriculum and teaching in these schools (Mani and Ramasamy 2007, p. 8).

Beyond this, Indian participation in the INA and later the left-wing organizations facilitated the formation of political parties and reform organizations. Those individuals who had leadership experience in the INA formed the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) in 1946. The National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) and other unions were formed by the former members of the INA. The revitalization of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was not possible without the participation of the INA members.

It was the INA's anti-British radicalism that created an unprecedented overarching solidarity amongst Indians of different ethnic and religious persuasions during the Japanese occupation. Hundreds of Indian men and women willingly contributed to the efforts of the INA. Bose's oratory skills and his deep commitment to the cause of freedom of India galvanized Indians into action. The INA debacle in Burma and the subsequent news about Bose's death induced a sense of pessimism amongst Indians. However, when the British returned to reassert their authority, Indians, having learned so much under the INA, were quick to form new organizations to confront the British to improve their lives.

References

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