

INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY AND THE IMPHAL CAMPAIGN 1944

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ABSTRACT

During the Second World War, the Japanese Fifteenth Army, with the support of the Indian National Army (INA), advanced towards India's eastern frontier. The Japanese objective was primarily defensive to prevent a possible British invasion of Burma whereas the INA sought the liberation of India from British colonial rule. Their strategy focused on capturing Imphal, severing its main supply route at Kohima, and subsequently advancing towards Dimapur, a vital logistical centre connected by rail to Ledo, through which the Americans supplied China. The Indo-Japanese forces moved towards Imphal along three principal routes and engaged British forces in what came to be known as the Battles of Imphal and Kohima. The INA participated in these operations mainly through its 1st Division, commanded by Colonel Mohammad Zaman Kiani, along with Special Groups. The 1st Division was organized into three brigades, named after Gandhi, Nehru, and Azad. From the most capable soldiers of these units, the Subhas Brigade was formed. They were assigned for sabotage and guerrilla operations. While the Special group attached with each Japanese division was to assist these operations in espionage and propaganda. This article analyses the role and contribution of the Indian National Army in the battles that constituted the Imphal Campaign.

Keywords: INA, Japanese, Imphal, Battle, Brigade

INTRODUCTION

The attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, led European colonial territories in South East Asian region rapidly fell, with the British suffering major losses. In the first half of 1942, Malaya and Singapore fell. The British had neglected the defence of Burma, and by early 1942, the Japanese had captured Rangoon and pushed Allied forces back towards India through Manipur.

When the Japanese completed their occupation of Burma in the summer of 1942, a colonel on General Terauchi's Southern Army staff, Colonel Hayashi Akira, thought the Japanese should not halt, but follow through into Assam and take Dimapur and Tinsukia (Allen 1984, 150). Imperial GHQ in Tokyo was consulted, and Operation 21' was devised, in which a force of two divisions would approach India through the Hukawng Valley in northernmost Burma, another two divisions would take Imphal, the capital of Manipur State, and a third force, one division only, would move along the shores of the Bay of Bengal to take Chittagong (Allen 1984, 150). But it was regarded as dangerous, or at any rate inopportune, by a vigorous and influential figure, Major Fujiwara Iwaichi (Allen 1984, 150). Mutaguchi, whose 18th Division was stationed in the Shan States, also opposed, stating that the terrain in North Burma was so forbidding - endless jungles and mountains that no large-scale force could cross the mountains into Assam or be supported there (Allen 1984, 152).

However, the Japanese original plan to avoid attacking India was changed due to the Chindit expedition. The first Chindit expedition, codenamed as *Operation Longcloth*, comprised a force of 3,000 men led by Major-General Orde Wingate. The expedition began their march into occupied Burma on 8 February 1943, with the aim of striking Japanese communication and supply routes and causing maximum disruption. The expedition was an experimental operation, intended to demonstrate that British forces could operate deep inside Japanese-controlled territory, far from their own bases. Initially, the Chindits advanced with ease into the sparsely defended northern regions of Burma, where they successfully sabotaged railway lines, destroyed supply depots, and targeted communication points. However, when the Japanese launched counterattacks, the Chindits were compelled to withdraw in May 1943.

The success of first Chindit Expedition in a country which General Mutaguchi had previously thought impenetrable convinced him that Imphal should be attacked. The Japanese feared that Imphal would be a launchpad for the British to regain control of Burma. These led to planning for Imphal Campaign in the second half of 1943. Their objectives were for a defensive operation to forestall any British invasion of Burma in 1944 and to establish the Japanese defences on the frontier mountains, a stronger line than that of the River Chindwin where they had rested in 1943 (Toye 1978, 103). The Japanese plan was, first, to capture Imphal, and second, to advance toward the Brahmaputra Valley to cut off the northern front and disrupt the Allied air supply route to China (Slim 1986, 290). This

implies that after capturing Imphal and cutting off its primary supply line through the hills at Kohima, Japanese aimed to seize Dimapur, a crucial supply hub with a railway line to Ledo. This was the line, the Americans were using to send supplies to the airfields farther north, from where they were being flown to China (Katoch 2018, 21). Seizing Dimapur would deal a crushing blow to the Allies and possibly open up the way for deeper advances into India. The plans to launch an offensive against India were approved in Tokyo in January 1944. In February Mutaguchi received his orders.

IMPHAL CAMPAIGN

The Japanese Fifteenth Army

The Japanese Fifteenth Army, was overall in-charge of Japan's invading force against India. The Japanese Fifteenth Army was an army of the Imperial Japanese Army formed on November 9, 1941 with the primary objective of invading Burma. In 1944, it became part of the Burma Area Army with Lieutenant General Renya Mutaguchi taking Command from Shoziro Lida. It comprised with, three Infantry divisions - 15th Division, 31st Division, and 33rd Division, and an I.N.A. Division, a tank regiment, and other troops. Lieutenant-General Masafumi Yamauchi commanded the 15th Division. The Division was to occupy Ukhrul, Eastern part of Imphal valley and ultimately Imphal. The 31st Division was under the command of Lieutenant-General Kotoku Sato. The Division was to attack the British 14th Army base at Kohima and its supply depot at Dimapur (Keane 2011, 140–41). The 33rd Division under the command of Lieutenant-General Genzo Yanagida (until May 1944, after which he was replaced by Lieutenant General Tanaka Nobuo) would march to Tiddim on his way to Imphal. *Yamamoto force* a column of the 33rd division was to advance towards Imphal from Tamu-Palel Road in the Southeast. Both the 15th and 33rd divisions were to move against the British 4 Corps at Imphal. The 15th division had under its command three Regiments - 51st Regiment (Colonel Omoto), 60th Regiment (Colonel Matsumura), 67th Regiment. Under 33rd Division - 213th Regiment, 214th Infantry Regiment, and 215th Infantry Regiment. 5th Air Division under General Tazoe.

Indian National Army

Subhas Chandra Bose, the Supreme Commander of the Indian National Army was anxious that the entire advance into India should be spearhead by the INA. He said, '*The first drop of blood to be shed on Indian soil should be that of a member of the INA*' (Khan 1946, 75). In the initial plans for invasion of India, General Terauchi's had been reluctant to confer any responsibilities to the INA beyond espionage and propaganda. Terauchi saw the Indians merely as guerrilla, sabotage and intelligence units scattered piecemeal in attachment to the Japanese divisions in Burma (Allen 1984, 170). Bose challenge Terauchi's views on utilizing the INA and demanded that the INA be considered as an autonomous army acting in alliance with the Japanese and under overall Japanese

command (Allen 1984, 170).

The aimed of the INA is to entered into India and liberate from the British rule. Bose had planned that the capture of Imphal would be followed by the installation of the Provisional Government of Free India which would have offered it an opportunity to organise the Indians for an anti-British revolt (Ghosh 1969, 169). Bose replied to Mohan Singh, when asked how he could be convinced of a Japanese victory in Assam, *“My name carries enough weight, When everyone will revolt. Wavell's whole army will join me”* (Allen 1984, 169). He said *“Thereafter the repercussion inside India and within the ranks of the British Army would be so great that nothing will then prevent the outbreak of an Indian revolution”* (Lahiri 1947, 107).

The Indo-Japanese forces advanced toward Imphal from three main directions. From the south-west, including the Tiddim Road and the Silchar Track, came the 33rd Division; from the southeast, along the Tamu-Palel Road, advanced the Yamamoto Force of the same division; and from the north and north-east, the 15th Division moved (Katoch 2018, 23). In the Battle of Imphal around 6,000 INA men participated (Toye 1978, 126). The INA involved in the battle through the 1st Division under the Command of Colonel Mohammad Zaman Kiani and the Special Groups. The 1st division was formed with the objective of conducting guerrilla operations for the fighting in the mountainous areas around Imphal, where such operations were considered essential. It was divided into three Brigades, named after Gandhi, Nehru, and Azad. Subhas Brigade, was formed from the best soldiers of the three Brigades. The four Brigades are:

- 1st Subhas Brigade under Lieutenant-Colonel Shah Nawaz Khan
- 2nd Gandhi Brigade under Lieutenant-Colonel Inayat Jan Kiani
- 3rd Azad Brigade under Lieutenant-Colonel Gulzara Singh
- 4th Nehru Brigade under Major General Aziz Ahmad

The 1st Division set up its Divisional headquarters at Chamol (Tengnoupal Dist., Manipur). In addition to the 1st Division, there were three other units - Special Service Group (re-designated as Bahadur Group), Intelligence and Reinforcement groups. They were organised in special groups and attached to each Japanese divisions to act as guides, interpreters, propagandists and spies (Toye 1978,126). Operating across multiple sectors in close coordination with Hikari Kikan, these groups were deployed under the supervision of senior INA officers as follows:

- (a) Arakan Sector: under the command of Colonel Misra and Major Mehar Das.
- (b) Chin Hills Sector: under the command of Colonel S. A. Malik (Commander of Intelligence Group).
- (c) Kohima Sector: under the command of Major Maghar Singh and Major Ajmere Singh (Khan 1946, 78-79).

Thus, the military operation of the INA were planned to coordinate with the Japanese campaign in two ways: The first involved the independent role of the 1st Division assigned for sabotage and guerrilla operations. The force was poorly equipped and armed, inadequately trained for the terrain in which it operated, and dependent on the Japanese for logistical support and supplies (Katoch 2018, 17). While, the second was the special groups attached to each of the Japanese divisions, tasked with guiding, interpreting, disseminating propaganda, conducting espionage, and to penetrate British lines, establish contact with Indian sepoys, and persuade them to defect to their side. Prior to the deployment of the guerrilla brigades, Special groups were already active at the front.

THE BATTLE

Shah Nawaz, commanding 2nd and 3rd Battalions of the Subhas Brigade (1st Battalion was diverted to the Kaladan valley where they occupied successfully Mowdok- Indian territory), was stationed in the Chin Hills areas of Haka and Falam from the beginning of March. His forces engaged in three or four clashes with the British-led Chin Levies and carried out a small expedition to capture a British patrol base. By the end of May, six companies, by then reduced to about half their original strength were ordered to reinforce the Japanese at Kohima. Shah Nawaz and his men reached Kohima, where the British forces whose strength had increased considerably were launching increasingly vigorous counterattacks. The INA troops held their positions repelling one assault after another (Khan 1946, 100). Later, Shahnawaz learned that 31st Division was withdrawing from its position and the Brigade was ordered to withdraw to Ukhrul, from where it was to launch an attack on Imphal along the Ukhrul-Imphal road. Shah Nawaz returned with his unit to Ukhrul, where he dispatched reconnaissance parties to identify possible routes for the planned offensive on Imphal. A few days later, he was informed that the situation had deteriorated further. Due to the heavy monsoon, the supply services were unable to deliver rations to the troops stationed in that area. Consequently, on 22 June, he received orders to withdraw first to Tamu and finally to the east bank of the Chindwin River (Khan 1946, 100-103). In the end, none of Shah Nawaz's battalions despite being specially selected took a direct part in the major campaign that Netaji had long planned and worked tirelessly for: the joint advance of Indian and Japanese forces that was intended to carry the army and the government of Azad Hind across India's border.

The Gandhi Brigade and Azad Brigade were engaged on the left and right flanks, respectively, of the *Yamamoto force* a column of the Japanese 33rd Division along the Tamu-Palel road from May to July. The Gandhi Brigade, established its headquarter at Khanjol village- 18 miles away from Chamol. The Gandhi Brigade to cover the left flank of the *Yamamoto force* of his advance to Palel,

to block the Mombi track. In addition, the Brigade was ordered to participate in the attack on Palel Airfield. It was a target for the Japanese because the Airfield played a crucial role for Allied supplied during the Siege of Imphal and several supply dumps and depots were also at its vicinity. Capturing it would provide them with vital supplies, control of a key airfield, and undermine Allied air defences. To address this, Inayat formed a task force of 300 soldiers from the entire regiment and placed under the command of Major Pritam Singh, and sent them with minimal supplies; carrying only one day's worth of rations, rifles, and 50 rounds of ammunition each. Pritam Singh led his force down the jungle track from Khanjol on the night of April 30th, to Palel (Toye 1978, 231).

The Japanese force were unable to reach the airfield via the Tamu-Palel Road due to the defence of the Shenam Saddle (Katoch 2018, 99). The plan was to target the airfield from the south by Gandhi Brigade while the Japanese from the east, via Langgol on 1st May. In the end, the Japanese move had been foiled, but the INA's attack went through on the night of 2-3 May via the village of Purum Chumpang (Katoch 2018, 63). The British fiercely retaliated, subjecting the Gandhi Brigade positions to intense artillery bombardment, which resulted in the deaths of 250 soldiers (Allen 1984, 227). Major Pritam Singh withdrew to Purum Chumpang and sent out a Bahadur Group patrol to gather intel for a new attack, and requesting assistance from Kiani, for urgent assistance. Lt Colonel Inayat, was attacked by a company of the Frontier Force Rifles and subjected to an air strike when he arrived with more men near the vicinity of the Airfield, that killed 50 and wounded many more INA soldiers. The intense artillery fire severely weakened the morale of the rest soldiers causing them to lose confidence and will to fight. Kiani ordered a retreat to Khanjol, the exhausted forces finally reached their base on 4th May. Pritam Singh's Bahadur Group patrol had surrendered. This series of setbacks marked a significant blow to their efforts. Several hundred INA men deserted before the end of the battle, although the majority of the force remained in the hills around the Tamu-Palel Road, wracked by disease and hunger (Katoch 2018, 63). Despite repeated attacks by British forces, the Brigade remained positioned in and around Khanjol, Mithun Khunou and the Mombi track until it finally withdrew (Toye 1978, 234-235) on the second half of July 1944.

The Azad Regiment did not arrive until the beginning of May. Due to the lack of motor transport at Yeu, it was forced to cover more than one hundred miles to the Kabaw Valley on foot. Upon arrival at Tamu in mid-May, the Brigade Commander, Colonel Gulzara Singh, reported to the Divisional Commander, General M. Z. Kiani, at Chamol and received instructions regarding the employment of his unit. The Azad Brigade was assigned the task of conducting intensive guerrilla operations against British forces in the Palel sector. Their designated area of operations lay to the east of the Tamu-Palel road, with Brigade Headquarters established near Mintha. The Brigade initiated operations and began preparing bases for sustained action. However, before a large-scale offensive could be launched, the

onset of the monsoon forced Colonel Gulzara Singh to order a withdrawal under instructions from the Divisional Commander. The Azad Brigade subsequently withdrew to Kalewa via the main Kalewa-Tamu road, alongside the Gandhi Brigade (Khan 1946, 122). The Brigade also suffered as much as did the 2nd Brigade from disease and starvation (Toye 1978, 125). As for the 4th or Nehru Brigade, it departed from Malaya so much later than the other three that it never reached the Chindwin (Fay 1993, 290).

In the Tiddim sector, Lieutenant-General Yanagida's 33rd Division, accompanied by the INA Special Group under Colonel Shaukat Malik (Commander of the Intelligence Group), advanced along the Tiddim Road by 7 March 1944. The combined forces attacked the British defensive base of the 17th British Columns at Yaiyok (Zezo) in Thingaiphai, Churachandpur. The British were compelled to retreat, establishing defensive positions at Phougak-chao-ikhai, Tronglaobi, and Okshongbung. By the night of 13 April 1944, the Japanese and INA forces had cleared Moirang (40 km south of Imphal) and secured the area up to Potshangbam. On 14 April 1944, Captain Ito of the 33rd Division, and Colonel Shaukat Ali hoisted the Tricolour Flag on 14th April at Moirang. In mid-July 1944, they commenced its retreat from Manipur.

The INA Division had set out for Imphal with a strength of approximately six thousand men; only about two thousand six hundred returned. Of these, nearly two thousand required immediate hospitalization. During the campaign, around 715 men deserted, about 400 were killed in action, roughly 800 surrendered, and nearly 1,500 perished from disease and starvation (Toye 1978, 126).

CONCLUSION

Despite being inadequately equipped, insufficiently trained, and heavily dependent on Japanese logistical support, the Indian National Army (INA) played a significant role in the Imphal Campaign. The actions of the Gandhi Brigade, which covered the left flank of the Yamamoto Force and launched an attack on the Palel Airfield, were particularly noteworthy. Although this operation did not achieve substantial military success, it broke the prevailing stalemate and caused considerable psychological shock to the Allied forces. Similarly, the Subhas Brigade, under Lieutenant-Colonel Shah Nawaz Khan, advanced as far as Kohima, demonstrating the INA's determination to operate alongside Japanese forces in critical sectors. In the Tiddim sector, Colonel Shaukat Ali's advance up to Moirang, where the Tricolour was hoisted and the area was held for few months, symbolically challenged British authority. These actions, though limited in strategic impact, clearly demonstrated that British rule in India was not invincible and could be openly confronted.



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