

# Consolidation and Sustenance of the Indian Independence League in Japan and Southeast Asia during World War II: Appraising Notes from the *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*

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## Abstract

This paper primarily revisits and appraises the *Memoirs of A.M. Nair* which were first published in 1982 and brought out an in-depth, first-hand account of the numerous facts regarding Japan's association with the Indian Independence League, its inception during the World War II years, and how it was sustained during its initial phase, till the time its headquarters shifted from Tokyo to Bangkok, and finally to Singapore. The paper delves into analyzing details in the functioning of the League under its founder, Rash Behari Bose, and Nair as the Chief Liaison Officer for Indian Affairs. More significantly, it seeks to evaluate how the Indian Independence League in Japan and across the Southeast Asia consolidated itself as an organization, and became instrumental in promoting the cause of the Indian independence movement against the British Empire, especially in reference to the crucial role played by Japan's political and military leadership, especially the Second Bureau's *Eighth Section* at the Armed Forces headquarters in Kudan Hills.

The Indian Independence League was an organization of the Indian diaspora mainly spread across Southeast Asia, Japan, China, and parts of South Asia prior to, and during, the years of World War II. It resiliently opposed the colonial British rule in India. The anti-colonial sentiment against the British Empire and a strong sense of Indian nationalism became binding factors among this Indian diaspora community. The Indian Independence League opened its headquarters in Tokyo in November 1942 under the leadership of Rash Behari Bose. An extraordinary Indian revolutionary leader and freedom fighter, Bose (1886–1945) became better known and recognized in Japan, where he lived in exile from 1915 until the time of his death. Despite attracting little attention within the historiography of India's independence, Rash Behari became the most wanted man in India during World War I and remained an implacable opponent of Britain's imperial rule till the very end.<sup>1</sup>

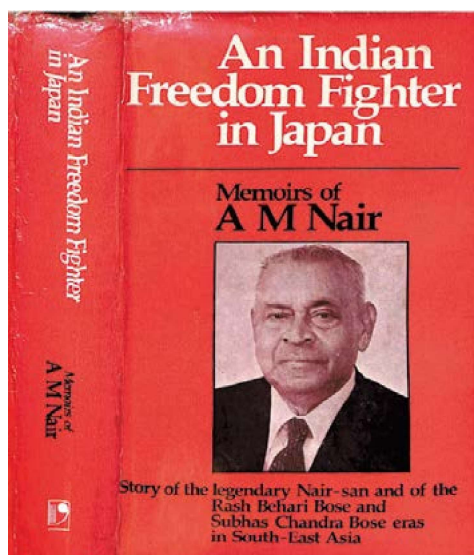
While the organization itself was based in Tokyo, the Indian Independence League's conferences were held in Bangkok, and Rangoon later during the World War II years. This paper primarily revisits and appraises the *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, first published in 1982 as an in-depth, first-hand account of the facts regarding the Japanese association with the Indian Independence League from its inception through its initial years until its headquarters were relocated from Tokyo to Singapore. While several books have been written on the Indian Independence

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed further reading and reference on Rash Behari Bose, see, Monika Chansoria, "Rash Behari Bose of Nakamura: From Being Exiled in Japan to Founding the Indian National Army and Promoting a Pan-Asianist Discourse," *Policy Brief*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, August 16, 2021, available at [PolicyBrief\\_Chansoria\\_210816.pdf](#)

movement in Southeast Asia, the *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*<sup>2</sup> fairly counters quite a few errors of fact and distortions of truth to set the record straight, given that he was at the League's helm working alongside its founder Rash Behari Bose. The paper seeks to analyze how the consolidation and sustenance of the Indian Independence League in Japan and across the Southeast Asian diaspora during World War II was instrumental in promoting the cause of the Indian independence movement against the British Empire.



Towards the end of November 1941, A.M. Nair received a message from the Kwantung Army headquarters requesting him to remain in Hsinking until further advice. Nair registered in his memoirs that it was “not difficult to guess the reason” in that, for the past several months, the military’s high command had remained in a state of emergency and the communications room was being manned round the clock, collectively indicating that Japan was all set to enter World War II; on December 8, 1941 the world heard of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>3</sup> At dawn the same day, Radio Tokyo broadcast the Emperor’s Rescript:

..... Patiently have we waited, and long have we endured the hope that our government might retrieve the situation in peace, but our adversaries, showing not the least spirit of conciliation, have unduly delayed a settlement and in the meantime, they have intensified the economic and political pressure to compel thereby Our Empire to submission. We have therefore resolutely declared war on the United States and Britain for the sake of the self-preservation and self-defense of the Empire and for the establishment of enduring peace in East Asia.....<sup>4</sup>

With the above pronouncement, the Greater East Asia War had begun. The very next day, on December 9, Nair confessed to have received a telephone call from the Kwantung Army General Staff asking him to reach their office, where he was told that the Japanese Navy had launched strikes against Singapore and that the British battleship *Prince of Wales* and battlecruiser

<sup>2</sup> The primary document cited and referenced from, throughout this paper: *An Indian Freedom Fighter in Japan: Memoirs of A. M. Nair* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1985).

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 19: *The Second World War and The Indian Independence League in Southeast Asia*, p. 164.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

*Repulse* had been sunk. That moment was being regarded as the beginning of the end of British colonialism. Within the first month of the war, it was clear that Hong Kong and other centers would soon fall to the Japanese, and indeed they did by the end of December 1941, with Singapore formally surrendering in February 1942.

With colonial Britain taking a heavy beating from Japan, and India's long struggle for independence against British imperialism being all too well known, it was considered the perfect time for the Indian independence movement, and for its advocates spread across the world, to consolidate the final push to free India from colonial British rule. Nair knew that the struggle required immediate reorientation, and that it was time for him to move to the scene of the war, leaving Manchukuo on a mission aimed at furthering the cause of India's freedom.<sup>5</sup> Nair bid farewell to his family and friends at the Hsinking railway station and left for Tientsin to fly to Shanghai primarily to formally establish an Indian Independence Center there. The center was to be funded and maintained by the local Indian leadership owing to Shanghai's well-to-do Indian population, mostly engaged in trade. In addition, there was a large British presence in Shanghai and thus a substantial population of Sikhs employed in the police force. Nair notes in his memoirs that the Sikh community was extremely helpful and cooperated with him in setting up an organization to conduct effective publicity for the Indian freedom movement.<sup>6</sup>

### **Establishment of the Shanghai Office and the Bangkok-based *Tamura Kikan***

During this period, Nair recalled meeting several Japanese army officers to ensure proper protection for all the Indian residents. Nair specifically mentioned Major Mishina for his good offices in insisting that, although Indians were still British subjects technically, rendering them liable to be categorized by the Japanese forces ordinarily as "enemy nationals," special care should be taken to treat them as a favored community entitled to safety.<sup>7</sup> Following instructions from Tokyo, all Indians were soon given due protection through these local arrangements. Escorted by Major Mishina, Nair went to Nanking to meet General Jun Ushiroku at his headquarters and discussed the desirability of Indo-Japanese collaboration in eliminating British power in India, Burma, and elsewhere in East Asia.<sup>8</sup> It needs to be recalled that A.M. Nair's connection with Major Mishina went back to early 1939, when the Manchukuo Government decided to establish *Kenkoku Daigaku* (Kenkoku University) at Hsinking with specialist instructors in various faculties, including military science and tactics. General Seishirō Itagaki from Tokyo, General Kanji Ishiwara, Colonel Masanobu Tsuji, Lt. Colonel Kataoka and Major Mishina were sponsors of the new institution, and they invited Nair to join its teaching faculty dealing with national and international psychology. The institution was under the control of the Manchukuo Government's Ministry of Education, but technical support came from the Kwantung Army.<sup>9</sup>

The Shanghai office of the Indian freedom movement thus began to function well. In January 1942, Nair along with a prominent businessman, Mr. Osman, arranged for an Indian flag-hoisting ceremony to be conducted on the 26<sup>th</sup> of the month. A few ladies from the Indian state of Punjab sang the patriotic song *Vande Mātaram*<sup>10</sup> (translated: I bow to thee, mother[land]) in chorus. Nair wrote that it was the first time that Shanghai had witnessed an Indian ceremony of this kind in an

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 166.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 18: *Last Spell in Manchukuo*, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup> *Vande Mātaram* is a renowned Indian poem penned by Bengali poet Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in the 1882 novel *Anandamath*. Written in Bengali and Sanskrit, the first two verses of this poem were adopted as India's national song by the Indian National Congress in October 1937.

open arena with nearly 500 members of the community being present. Following this, Nair sailed back from Shanghai to Japan. Before departing, he was pleasantly surprised when Major Mishina came to see him off and handed over a cash amount of 6,000 yen, sent by General Ushiroku with a message that Nair should use the amount for strengthening the work for the Indian freedom movement.<sup>11</sup>

Upon reaching Tokyo, Nair's first task at hand was to contact the military high command, especially the Second Bureau's Eighth Section at the Armed Forces headquarters in Kudan Hills. The large complex of offices there, the Imperial headquarters, and the General Staff were collectively called *Daihonei* (Imperial General Headquarters (IGHQ)).<sup>12</sup> Nair noted that, while the Japanese military high command had been diligently preparing for war for quite some time, it had also planned to secure the goodwill of the large Indian community residing across East Asia and Southeast Asia.

As early as September 1941, Japan began organizing a liaison group that was tasked to keep in touch with this community numbering almost two million, within which were many recognized supporters of the Indian independence movement.<sup>13</sup> Describing the Chief of the Army General Staff, General Hajime Sugiyama as a man of political foresight, Nair credited him as a key supporter of the idea that an office should be established for handling matters pertaining to the Indian community. General Sugiyama decided to have such an office in Bangkok under the watch of Colonel Hiroshi Tamura, Military Attaché in Japan's diplomatic mission. Being a central place with respect to the Indians located in various parts of Southeast Asia, the location was well suited for effective coordination; Major Iwaichi Fujiwara and a staff of about 20 personnel experienced in intelligence work were deputed to assist Colonel Tamura. A few of them had not just a fair knowledge of English but could also manage to speak a little Hindi. Within this network, A.M. Nair was chosen as the go-to link between the high-command in Tokyo and the new establishment in Bangkok more commonly referred to as the *Tamura Kikan* (Tamura Office).<sup>14</sup> At this point, the Indian community presented a request to the Japanese authorities via Nair that Rash Behari Bose be recognized as their leader in Japan and across Southeast Asia. The request was agreed to by the Japanese government readily. Moreover, it was also agreed upon that Nair would be the channel for discussions and communication of decisions on actions and programs between the two sides. Accordingly, Nair's official designation became Chief Liaison Officer for Indian Affairs.<sup>15</sup>

In this evolving backdrop, Colonel Tamura received instructions from Tokyo that Major Fujiwara and his staff should study the British military set-up in India, Malaya, and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. However, Fujiwara went beyond the scope set for him by the high command in Tokyo and sought the help of the Indian prisoners of war (POWs) in Malaya. He chose to place these POWs under the control of an Indian captain, Mohan Singh, who belonged to one of the early British Indian Army units which had lost to the Japanese at Jitra situated in the northern region of the Malay Peninsula. Singh decided not to join the retreating British army and instead began working with the Japanese. The Indian POWs were handed over by the Japanese to Mohan Singh, who then tried to recruit them into the Indian National Army. Following the crucial surrender of Singapore, where large numbers of Indian as well as British soldiers were seized, an alliance was formed between Fujiwara and Mohan Singh, as recorded in the *Memoirs of A.M.*

<sup>11</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 19: *The Second World War and The Indian Independence League in Southeast Asia*, p. 168.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

*Nair*.<sup>16</sup> The fall brought almost 45,000 Indian POWs into Mohan Singh's sphere of influence.

### **Inception of the Indian Independence League during World War II**

While Nair was in Manchukuo, Rash Behari Bose was very active in Japan, and they both were engaged in anti-British work in their own ways. Although Indian freedom fighters were spread across Thailand, Malaya, Burma, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, what eventually came to be known as the Indian Independence League was formed under Rash Behari Bose after Japan's entry into World War II. This provided a formal shape to the Indian freedom struggle in all these areas in a coordinated way, the result of multiple rounds of discussions with the Japanese high command in Tokyo by Rash Behari Bose and Nair wherein the latter was the link between Bose and the Japanese military authorities headed by General Sugiyama.<sup>17</sup> While Rash Behari Bose had significant contacts with the higher echelons of Japan's political spectrum, Nair was the only Indian with access to the military, especially with the *Daihonei*'s Second Bureau. In fact, the first meeting between Rash Behari Bose and General Sugiyama was arranged by Nair through the officers directly concerned with Indian affairs. The aim was to evolve and create a proper organization for the Indian population beyond Japan across all of Southeast Asia. There was consensus that the time had come to consolidate all the scattered elements into one integrated machine under a centralized leadership.<sup>18</sup> Rash Behari Bose suggested in consultation with Nair that the proposed organization be named the Indian Independence League, to which General Sugiyama agreed.

Thus, in the first week of February 1942, it was announced over the radio from Tokyo and published in Japan's newspapers that the Indian Independence League had been established, with its headquarters in Room 302 of the Sanno Hotel in Tokyo.<sup>19</sup> Nair began meeting Bose regularly, and their immediate concern was the safety of the lives and properties of the nearly two million Indian nationals in areas either already occupied, or likely to be controlled, by Japanese forces, most significantly in Malaya, where practically half the total Indian population of Southeast Asia had been residing. The bulk of these Indians were laborers working on British plantations or engaged in trade, although there were substantial numbers in other categories, too, such as lawyers, doctors, technicians, and white-collar workers.<sup>20</sup> The Japanese Armed Forces had begun to sweep through the Malay Peninsula from the Thai border, marching towards Singapore. With British resistance completely broken, Nair noted a request he made to the military high command in Kudan Hills in strict confidence, that of issuing urgent instructions to their Malaya command to ensure that their troops would not harm Indians.<sup>21</sup> In his memoirs, Nair admits that it "was gratifying that orders accordingly were issued immediately" – and the effect was remarkable.

Except for a few unfortunate and isolated cases of ill-treatment/killing, the Indian civilian community was spared a dire fate. More significantly, Indian POWs were also unharmed.<sup>22</sup> For that matter, Nair went on to state further that, in various written records from those times in Malaya, India, and elsewhere, it has been acknowledged that the Indian nationals were saved on the orders of the military high command in Tokyo. The Malaya command in particular was

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

instructed by Tokyo how to distinguish Indians from others, with the signal from Tokyo requiring Japanese armed men to identify Indians and to ask the question “Gandhi?” whenever in doubt. If the answer was in the affirmative, even if it were in the form of a mere nod, the persons were to be well cared for.<sup>23</sup> Had the orders not to treat Indians as enemy nationals not gone out in time from Tokyo, the community might have suffered indescribable horrors.<sup>24</sup>

By this time, *Nippon Hoso Kyokai* (NHK; Japan Broadcasting Corporation) had opened a short-wave station for daily broadcasts by the Tokyo-based Indian Independence League to India. Rash Behari Bose used this facility to communicate with the freedom-fighting leadership in India and explain the nature and purpose of the League, which began to be recognized as a united, impassioned body of Indians residing in Southeast Asia and the Far East and determined to support the struggle for India’s independence.<sup>25</sup> It was also becoming clear that the Indian freedom campaign could be sustained in Japanese-occupied or Japanese-controlled territories, given the cooperation of the authorities in Tokyo and their regional commands. The situation was delicate, and needed to be negotiated judiciously and diplomatically with the Japanese high-command so that the League could function effectively without compromising its status as an autonomous Indian body.<sup>26</sup>

The League had taken off well in Thailand and Malaya under the local Indian leadership by establishing branches in all important centers. The network was channelized through programs devised from time to time by the central organization headed by Rash Behari Bose, who advocated for setting up national councils. In Malaya, for instance, the immediate frontline leadership was entrusted to Pritam Singh and, in Thailand, to Swamy Satyananda Puri.<sup>27</sup> Pritam Singh was a missionary Sikh who had initially gone to Thailand for work. There he met Major Fujiwara, however, and went to Malaya to call upon the Indian soldiers in the British Army to lay down their arms and switch over to the Japanese side. Swamy Satyananda Puri had been a member of the “Greater Indian Society” of Calcutta and had gone to Thailand in 1930 to study Thai culture and language. Later, he stayed on and involved himself in the Indian freedom movement.<sup>28</sup>

When Singapore fell to Japan in February 1942, General Archibald Percival surrendered himself and his troops to Lt. General Tomoyuki Yamashita of Japan’s 25<sup>th</sup> Army. The prisoners of war included about 45,000 Indian soldiers. They were handed over formally to Major Fujiwara by Lt. Colonel Hunt of the British Army at Farrer Park. Among them was Colonel Niranjana Singh Gill, a highly-rated “King’s Commission” officer belonging to the aristocratic family of the Majeethias of Punjab.<sup>29</sup> Major Fujiwara accepted the surrender of the Indian POWs, addressing them as “beloved Indian soldiers” and promised to work for good relations between them and the Japanese forces.

More importantly, there was a clandestine collaboration arrangement between him and one of the POWs, Captain Mohan Singh belonging to the first battalion of 14 Punjab Regiment stationed near Jitra on Malaya’s border with Thailand. It was said that Singh had defected to the advancing Japanese army, although Nair mentions in his memoirs that there is no authentic account as to what transpired on the subject. Mohan Singh had joined the British-Indian Army in 1907 and

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 175–176.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp. 176–177.

was an infantry soldier, working his way up to a commission from the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun.<sup>30</sup> Apparently, Major Fujiwara was highly impressed by Captain Singh and gave him greater latitude to deal with the rest of the Indian POWs.<sup>31</sup> Nair stated that, although there were a few who cast suspicions on the Fujiwara-Singh equation, Fujiwara's choice of Singh was based on the latter's qualification as the first Indian officer to switch allegiance.<sup>32</sup>

By this time, it had become firmly established that the Indian Independence League in Japan and Southeast Asia was founded by Rash Behari Bose, and that A.M. Nair was the main link between the League and the Japanese government, as they both were convinced that the cause of Indian freedom could be intensified in Japanese-occupied/Japanese-controlled territories with the cooperation of the military authorities in Tokyo and their regional commands. However, at the beginning of 1943, Rash Behari's health began to deteriorate.

### The Tokyo Conference, March 1942

Speaking before the Japanese Diet in the first four months of 1942, Prime Minister Hideki Tōjō and Chief of the Army General Staff, General Hajime Sugiyama repeatedly called upon Indians to rise and shrug off the oppressive grip of British rule.<sup>33</sup> Soon after Tōjō had announced in the Diet the Japanese government's approach and its support for the Indian freedom movement, Rash Behari Bose and Nair, backed by the IGHQ, discussed the need to organize a conference in Tokyo in March. The invitees included all the important regional leaders of the League from Southeast Asia to exchange views and chalk out an action program. The meeting was set for March 28, 1942 with delegates from Malaya, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Shanghai to be in attendance.<sup>34</sup> Bose decided that, while he would continue as Founder President of the League and be Chairman of the proposed Tokyo Conference, there would also be a co-founder and an alternate to take on his responsibilities in the event of any emergency. Bose chose Nair for the said roles. In addition, Nair was to be Chief Liaison Officer for dealings on all important matters among the Indian Independence League, the Japanese government, and the military high command concerning all matters Indian.<sup>35</sup>

On the advice of the *Tamura Kikan* in Bangkok, under which Fujiwara was working in Singapore, Bose and Nair suggested to IGHQ that a couple of representatives of the Indian POWs be allowed to attend the Tokyo Conference since that would be helpful in maintaining the morale of the men who had to surrender and in utilizing them in any suitable future activity. Under Fujiwara's arrangements, the two representatives who attended the Tokyo Conference were Captain Mohan Singh and Colonel Niranjana Singh Gill.<sup>36</sup> About 25 delegates met at the Sanno Hotel for the conference, where Rash Behari Bose was unanimously elected President of the Indian Independence League.<sup>37</sup>

It was also decided to have further discussions in a plenary session of the League to be held in a more central place than Tokyo so that as wide a cross-section as possible of the Indian population in Southeast Asia could be involved in the deliberations. Bangkok was chosen as the

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>33</sup> Joyce Chapman Lebra, *The Indian National Army and Japan*, (Singapore: Asia Pacific Press Pte. Ltd., 1971), Chapter Thirteen: *Retrospect*, pp. 211–212.

<sup>34</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 20: *The Tokyo Conference of the Indian Independence League*, p. 180.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 182.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

venue for the next meeting of the League, scheduled to take place within the next six months. The appointment of a Council of Action, with Rash Behari Bose as President and N. Raghavan, K.P. Kesava Menon, S.C. Goho, and Captain Mohan Singh as members was also approved provisionally, subject to confirmation by the Bangkok Conference. The meetup at the Sanno Hotel concluded after three days, followed by a courtesy call on General Tōjō by Rash Behari Bose and all the delegates.<sup>38</sup>

### **The Bangkok Conference, June 1942**

Preparations for the Bangkok Conference – the Conference of East Asia and Southeast Asian Indians – were far more elaborate because of the very nature of the proposed gathering. While preparations for the Bangkok Conference were in full swing following the fall of Singapore, Rangoon, too, fell to the Japanese in March 1942, along with the Dutch East Indies, Bataan, and Corregidor.<sup>39</sup> The conference was formally inaugurated in Bangkok on June 15, 1942, with about 120 delegates in all. The publicity campaign was being organized in Tokyo by means of Japanese radio, and additional propaganda work for India's freedom struggle was being undertaken from Bangkok. Representation in this conference far exceeded that in the Tokyo Conference, with delegates coming in from Burma, Japan, Thailand, China, Manchukuo, the Philippines, and Borneo.

Soon after the Tokyo Conference, the military headquarters in Tokyo established a special office in a portion of the Sanno Hotel to work in close liaison with the Indian Independence League. The new office was being headed by Colonel Hideo Iwakuro, a highly-rated officer who previously was Commanding Officer of the 5<sup>th</sup> Imperial Guards Regiment. As per Nair's account, the Japanese government knew fully well that the outcome of the Bangkok Conference would be vital for evolving a pattern of good relations with the Indian community spread across Southeast Asia. When arrangements for the Bangkok Conference were nearly complete, the Indian Independence League decided that it would relocate its headquarters to Bangkok – a logical step, since Bangkok would be a central location from where follow-up actions on the decisions taken at the conference could be conveniently launched. Simultaneously, Colonel Iwakuro too moved his establishment to Bangkok. The *Tamura Kikan* was wound up and replaced by the *Iwakuro Kikan*.<sup>40</sup> However, Colonel Iwakuro soon proposed that his office not be named after any particular individual, and it was thus renamed the *Hikari Kikan*.<sup>41</sup> The principal adviser was Mr. Senda, who had lived for 25 years in India, mostly in Calcutta, and was engaged in the jute business.<sup>42</sup> The *Hikari Kikan* had a department for political affairs and one for military matters. There was also a third wing for intelligence and counter-espionage, publicity and propaganda, with a sub-office located in Singapore. Administration was the concern of the fourth department. Nair's memoirs state that there was an unwritten arrangement under which all details of information relevant to promoting good relations between the Japanese authorities and the Indian community would be exchanged between Rash Behari Bose or Nair on the League's side and Colonel Iwakuro personally on the part of the *Hikari Kikan*.<sup>43</sup>

The Indian Independence League adopted the Indian national flag at the Bangkok Conference. A copy of the multiple resolutions passed during the conference were forwarded by Bose in

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>39</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 21: *The Bangkok Conference*, p. 188.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>41</sup> *Hikari Kikan*, was the group set up by the Japanese government chiefly to liaise with the Indian Independence League and later the Indian National Army.

<sup>42</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 21: *The Bangkok Conference*, p. 192.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



his capacity as President of the League to Colonel Iwakuro for transmission to the Japanese government in Tokyo. Select significant resolutions passed included the following among others:

- ..... (xvi) On the severance of India from the British Empire, the Government of Japan would respect the territorial integrity and recognize the full sovereignty of India free from any foreign influence, control, or interference of a political, military, or economic nature;
- (xvii) the Government of Japan would exercise its influence with other powers and induce them to recognize the National Independence and absolute sovereignty of India;
- (xviii) Indians residing in the territories occupied by the Japanese forces should not be considered enemy nationals as long as they did not indulge in any action injurious to the Indian Independence League or hostile to the interest of Japan;
- (xx) The I.I.L. adopted the current National Flag of India and would request all friendly powers to recognize it.....<sup>44</sup>

Within about a fortnight, Colonel Iwakuro officially confirmed to Bose that the Government of Japan, in the spirit of its policy towards India as had already been announced by Prime Minister Tōjō, supported the Resolutions of the Bangkok Conference. As requested in one of the resolutions, the record of the decisions/recommendations of the conference would be kept secret by the Japanese government. Iwakuro requested the President of the League to preserve the secrecy of his reply as well, which Bose honored, thereby drawing the conference to an end on June 23, 1942.<sup>45</sup>

Rash Behari Bose saw the utility of the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army in their role as a great source of moral support for the freedom movement within India. The large number of compatriots in Southeast Asia served as a source of powerful inspiration to the freedom fighters residing in British India at that time. Under the leadership of Rash Behari Bose, the League secured the Japanese government's undertaking that no Indian Army personnel would be required to do manual labor like other POWs, which was considered no mean achievement. The enlistment of public opinion strongly in India's favor throughout Southeast Asia was one of the Indian Independence League's greatest achievements.<sup>46</sup>



A "Volunteer Pass" issued by the Indian Independence League; (*World War II Records from Burma, 1938–1945*) Southeast Asian Rare Book Collection, Library of Congress, Asian Division

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 200.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>46</sup> *Memoirs of A.M. Nair*, n. 2, Chapter 22: *The Indian National Army*, p. 212.

## The Final Move from Bangkok to Singapore

Against the above backdrop, Rash Behari Bose decided to move to Singapore and relocate the headquarters of the Indian Independence League there. The responsibility for the transfer of the League's headquarters to the new venue was entrusted to A.M. Nair.<sup>47</sup> The transfer of the headquarters was fraught with many problems. Nair recalled travelling from Bangkok up to the Malay border in a passenger train to which were attached five wagons carrying the League's property, including furniture, office equipment, documents, etc. Before departing from the Bangkok station, a senior officer from the *Hikari Kikan* had instructed the Japanese officers travelling with the Indians to take care of their entourage and safeguard the cargo wagons containing the League's goods. More importantly, the League's belongings included a very large quantity of cash. The challenge was that Bangkok currency was of no use in Malaya. Therefore, Nair recalled in his memoirs that the *Hikari Kikan* helped the League to convert all its cash funds into Singaporean military currency.<sup>48</sup> At the Ipoh station, Nair noticed that a large number of the working staff included Malays, Chinese, Indians, and Ceylonese, with the Indians and Ceylonese together making up almost 80 percent of the workforce.<sup>49</sup>

Upon arriving in Singapore, Nair worked closely with the *Hikari Kikan* in setting up and organizing the League's new offices. The place allotted to the League was on Chancery Lane, off Malcolm Road, in the Bukit Tinna area, with the residences of many of the League's office bearers situated around it, including that of Rash Behari Bose. The *Hikari Kikan*'s office was itself not very far from the League's. In addition to the League's radio station publicity, a newspaper in four different languages (English, Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam) was launched. The newspaper was printed under the League's own arrangements and widely distributed to the large Indian population residing throughout Malaya and beyond. The League's radio broadcasts, which on average lasted about six hours daily, covered almost 15 Indian languages besides English.<sup>50</sup> The policy part of the League's programs was as per the directions of Bose and Nair, with the latter keeping the morse cable news receiving and transmitting arrangements under his control. Nair maintained close association with the Domei News Agency, which controlled the services. It had an office in Singapore linked to its headquarters in Tokyo.<sup>51</sup> Nair noted that the Domei channel was as efficient as, if not better than, the Associated Press or United Press news systems.

Nair had suggested even earlier that, in the event of an emergency, Subhash Chandra Bose<sup>52</sup> was adjudged to be the best person to whom the leadership of these Indian organizations in Japan and Southeast Asia could be handed over to be carried forward. Popularly known as *Netaji* (Respected Leader) among Indians the world over, he became the undisputed leader of the militant wing of India's nationalist movement. He had escaped from India in 1941 and was living in Berlin seeking to promote the Indian liberation struggle from outside. Notably, his historic and daring voyage from Germany to Sumatra, partly by a U-boat and partly by a Japanese submarine, was a rare feat of coordination between the navies of Germany and Japan. From Sumatra he flew to Tokyo and met General Tōjō, and thereafter arrived with Rash Behari in Singapore. Nair's description of the function where Rash Behari cheerfully handed over his leadership to his

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., Chapter 23: *The Indian Independence League's Move from Bangkok to Singapore*, p. 213.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 216.

<sup>52</sup> For a detailed further reading and reference on *Netaji* Bose, the Indian National Army and Japan, see, Monika Chansoria, "Japan, *Hikari Kikan*, and Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army: The Defining, Yet Unfinished 1940s Connect," *Policy Brief*, The Japan Institute of International Affairs, Tokyo, February 5, 2021, available at [PolicyBrief\\_Chansoria\\_210205.pdf](#)

chosen successor *Netaji* Bose is touching. When World War II ended with Japan's unconditional surrender, it automatically resulted in the disintegration of the Indian Independence League and the Indian National Army. In all, the founding and subsequent operations of the Indian Independence League spread in Japan and across Southeast Asia shall remain eternally etched in the history of the anti-colonial independence movement which sought to throw off the imperial yoke of the British to establish an independent Indian nation in 1947.