

When Bose was in China!

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A quick google search of the keywords ‘Bose and China’ will provide numerous headlines of news reports such as ‘what happened to Netaji! Was he in Red China?’ (*Oneindia* 2015), ‘Aide believed Netaji was alive in China in 1948’ (*Hindustantimes* 2015), ‘Did Bose play role in Mao’s revolution?’ (*The Times of India* 2015) Another pointedly asks about the ‘Chinese angle in Netaji’s death mystery?’ (*Firstpost* 2013) The running theme in each of these reports is the possibility of Bose escaping his death and moving to China.

Almost all of these news reports were based on the assertion made by the journalist turned writer Anuj Dhar. Dhar has in the last few years published three books¹ on the subject of Subhas Chandra Bose’s death. He has dismissed the idea of Bose’ death and has approached the cause of unearthing the truth about Bose’s death with the zeal of a crusader. The official version is that Bose died of severe burns due to a plane-crash at the Taihoku airport in Taipei on 18 August 1945. However, Bose’s followers in India refused to believe that he died in the so-called crash. The widespread belief has been that the crash was

¹ *What Happened to Netaji* (2015), *India’s Biggest Cover-Up* (2013), *Back from the Dead: Inside the Subhas Bose Mystery* (2005).

staged. The question of Bose’s death has the capacity to generate heightened public sentiments and outcry in India and has remained one of those questions that modern India as a polity and as nation has been trying to grapple with.² Numerous conspiracy theories abound on how Bose evaded arrests by staging the plane crash and led the rest of his life in self-imposed obscurity. One of the theories asserts that Bose in a clever ploy secretly moved to mainland China. As one of the headlines above points out, some speculate that Bose lived and took sides with the Communists in its war against the Kuomintang (KMT).

The main problem with this approach is that there is no documentary evidence to substantiate such claims. Bose’s China connection, therefore, has been decimated to unproven and hypothetical claims in India. We have very little proof that Bose lived in China after the Second World War. Hence, most of these reports and assertions can be categorised as speculative. For the purpose of this article, the author will specifically focus on the claim of Bose living in Communist China. The

² The Government of India had constituted two commissions, Mukherjee Commission (1999), and Khosla Commission (1970) & one committee, Shah Nawaz Committee (1956) in the post-independence era in order to inquire into the death of Subhas Chandra Bose.

objective of this article is, however, not to refute or validate such claims. This article focuses rather on Bose's wartime China connections and attempts to bring to light two little known visits made by Subhas Chandra Bose to China during the war period.

The First Visit

It is known with certainty that Subhas Chandra Bose visited China not once but twice during the peak of the war period, first in 1943 and then almost a year later in 1944. Bose's visits to wartime China were part of the larger mobilisation drive to draw the Indian population in China to the INA movement under the Provisional Government of Free India (PGFI) or the Azad Hind Arzi Hukumat at Singapore. The PGFI was a self-proclaimed government of Indians that was set up in Southeast Asia with Subhas Chandra Bose at its helm of power. The Indian Independence League (IIL) was the political and civic superstructure which operated under the PGFI. The Indian National Army (INA) was the army of the PGFI. The headquarters of the PGFI was located at Singapore.

Subhas Chandra Bose's first visit to China came within a month of taking over the Presidentship of the PGFI. He had taken the reins of the PGFI on 21 October 1943. Two weeks later, Bose was in Tokyo as one of the seven participants³ of the Japan sponsored Greater East Asia Conference⁴. Bose landed in Nanjing on 17 November with a team of nine of his ministers and aides, notably Lieutenant Colonel J.K. Bhonsle, the Chief of Staff, Bose's personal physician Lieutenant Colonel A.N. Raju, his private secretary, Abid Hassan, and his Cabinet Secretary, A. M. Sahay. It

³ The other representatives were Ba Maw (Burma), Wang Jingwei (China), Zhang Jinghui (Manchukuo), Wan Waithayakon (Thailand), Jose P. Laurel (Philippines), along with the Japanese Premier Hideki Tojo. Subhas Chandra Bose, however, attended the conference as an observer to the conference.

⁴ Greater East Asia Conference was organized by Japan from 5-6 November 1943 to expound on the conception of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere and was attended by the above mentioned members.

must be underscored that Bose was visiting China as the state guest of Wang Jingwei's Government. In wartime China, the Japanese had installed a puppet government under the leadership of Wang Jingwei (1883-1944). Wang had been one of the most influential leaders of the Kuomintang (KMT) before he defected to the Japanese side. Wang Jingwei's regime, based in Nanjing, claimed to be the real Nationalist Government of China and therefore, stood and functioned in opposition to the government of Chiang Kai-shek who operated from Chongqing. Ironically, while Chiang Kai-shek aspired to build close ties with the Indian National Congress and the British colonial government in India, Wang Jingwei's regime was one of the powers which recognised Bose's Arzi Hukumat government.

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Bose's visit to Nanjing was therefore styled as the state visit of the leader of a friendly government. During the course of the next three days, Bose interacted with the ministers of Wang's cabinet and dinners and banquets were held in Bose's honor. Bose also held a return banquet in honour of Wang Jingwei on 20 November which was attended by the dignitaries of Wang's Government (Mukherjee 2008; 2009).

The last day of his visit was spent in Shanghai. Bose wanted to get a first-hand report of the state of INA organisation which had been at its nascent stage in China. INA's mobilisation had not been restricted to the Indian population in Southeast Asia but had found followers in China as well. Soon after the establishment of the IIL in Southeast Asia in 1942, centres of the same had been set up in those metropolises in China like Shanghai, Hong Kong, Nanjing, Macau, Beijing, Tianjin etc. which had an immigrant Indian population. The centres in

Hong Kong and Shanghai were the largest ones in China.

The INA movement in China had found its supporters in the immigrant Indian population consisting mostly of soldiers, policemen, watchmen (Jackson 2012; Thampi 2005), moneylenders, traders and merchants, and political exiles. The INA apart from expanding the outreach of the INA movement to China, it also performed roles that would complement the total mobilisation drive of its headquarters in Southeast Asia.

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On the day Subhas Chandra Bose reached Shanghai, 3000 Indian residents in Shanghai had assembled in the Bund area carrying the national flag of India, and shouting slogans of 'Long Live Gandhi, Long Live Nehru, Long Live Bose.' The procession of Indians proceeded from the Bund and finally culminating at the historic Grand Theatre or the *Daguanming* Theatre. From the portico of this magnificent building, Bose in an emotional lecture which lasted for almost one and half hours, appealed to the Indians in Shanghai to rise to the occasion and come forward for the liberation of India. Bose linked the freedom of India with the rejuvenation of Asia.

In his address to the Indians in Shanghai, Bose eloquently brought out the civilizational and cultural affinities between the people of China and India. Bose thus tried to allay the fears and skepticism of Indians regarding Japanese ambitions in Asia and their objectives behind supporting Indian freedom. Bose called for the 'total mobilisation' of all the Indians in China. The Japan sponsored press in China widely reported the visit and covered Bose' movements in China. The *Minguo Ribao* welcomed the 'national hero of India' and remarked that the visit reflected the 'cordial

relationship' between China and India and the determination of both the nations 'to make concerted efforts in the GEA liberation war' (Jackson 2012; Thampi 2005).

The Last Visit

Almost a year later (30 November-3 December 1944), Bose visited Shanghai again. By this time the INA structure in China was in a much more organised state. In Shanghai, the IIL headquarters was situated at 157, Peking Road and the INA Training Centre was located at 330 E Paoshing Road. The Paoshing Road venue housed the local Sikh Gurudwara. The Sikhs had volunteered to give the place to the INA for its use.

In the days to come, this place became the very epicentre of INA activities in Shanghai and this religious place of the Sikhs also acquired a secular and temporal character, a not uncommon role of Sikh gurudwaras (National Archives of India n. d.a). This time, Subhas Chandra Bose also paid a visit to the INA Training Centre and met the trainees and the training officers there. *On To Delhi*, the English language journal of the INA in Shanghai, widely reported on this visit of Bose and gave publicity to his movements in Shanghai. This time, Bose addressed the Indians from the Cathay Hotel. He again called upon the Shanghai Indians to do their duty. He said,

'So while we prepare for the oncoming struggle with full confidence and faith we should do our duty wherever we are. World events are moving in our favor, Shanghai Indians have a special duty. The place of Shanghai is still quite important. From here goes the news of what is happening in this part of the world. They have to adopt an attitude which may go on showing to the world that one and all of the Indians are prepared to sacrifice their utmost for the liberation of the motherland. They

don't have only to show the Indian spirit before an international world here, and abroad which gets news from here, but have to do concrete deeds which would make them worthy of an independent and Free India' (National Archives of India n. d.b).

Subhas Chandra Bose was the only known Indian leader who had visited China during the war period apart from Jawaharlal Nehru's well-known visit of 1939. Nehru's visit was styled as a personal visit. Though he met the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) representatives, he could hardly interact with the local Indian population in China. Subhas Chandra Bose on the other hand, visited China in the capacity of a Head of State of PGFI. Bose also made it point to visit Shanghai which housed one of the largest populations of Indians in China.

We cannot be certain if Bose survived the crash in Taiwan and lived in 'Red China' but we do have documentary evidence that as a leader he visited China twice during the war period. Bose used his visits to mobilise the Indians in China in the INA's fight against British Imperialism. Subhas Chandra Bose's visits to wartime China proved to be fundamentally crucial for the consolidation and expansion of the social base of the INA movement in China such that by the end of the war period, almost the entire population of immigrant Indians in China had been swayed to join the INA movement. ■

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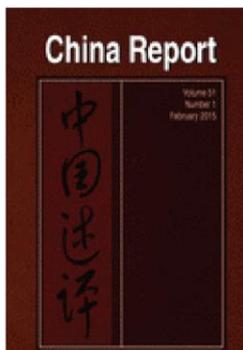


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