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## BATTLE OF KOHIMA VICTORY IN DEFEAT

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**Abstract:** This paper reflects on the events of the Battle of Kohima, one of the pivotal engagements in the Second World War. While the battle concluded with the defeat of the Imperial Army and the Indian National Army led by Subhash Chandra Bose, the ensuing events sparked a revitalization and a renewed awakening among the Indian masses. The noteworthy contribution of Subhash Chandra Bose and the institutional organization of the Indian National Army remain underemphasized in the academic discourse surrounding India's struggle for freedom. This paper aims to scrutinize the roles played by Subhash Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army in the rekindling of Indian nationalism, examining subsequent events that exerted pressure on the British and ultimately led to their withdrawal from India.

**Keywords:** Battle of Kohima, Indian National Army, India's freedom.

### INTRODUCTION

Most academic publication focuses on the theme of Bose's early life, his revolutionary ideas, his alienation with British rule and how he contributed to the raising of Indian National Army to liberate India from the British rule. While these themes are no doubt significant in terms of understanding the role played by Bose as well as his ideas and how he challenge the British. However, not many academic publications on the impact of INA and his contribution to the freedom movement and liberation of India from the British is covered. This brief paper seeks to provide more credit to Bose and Indian National Army in the fight against the British for Freedom.

### BATTLE OF KOHIMA

Battle of Kohima also known as the "Stalingrad of the East" was voted England's greatest battle by the British National Museum in 2013 beating the celebrated battles like D-Day, Normandy and Waterloo. The Americans were forcing the Japanese to retreat from the Pacific and the Imperial Army was staring at a defeat in the World War II. In a desperate bid for victory, they drew their attention towards British in India. Joyce Lebra in her paper *Japanese Army and the Indian National Army* says "Japan's intention was to fuel nationalism in India against the British." The Japanese commander in the region General Renya Mutuguchi along with the Indian National Army leader Subhash Chandra Bose hoped to cause a complete collapse of the British Raj. Mutuguchi strongly believed that this could mark the initial phase of a series of strategic moves into India, aiming not only to thwart the British invasion of Burma but also to induce a comprehensive collapse of the Raj. Originally conceived as a spoiling attack against the British 4 Corps at Imphal and Kohima, the operation code-named U-Go underwent expansion under General Mutuguchi's leadership. He broadened the plan to encompass a full-scale invasion of India with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the British Empire in the region. Despite initial objections from various quarters of the staff, these concerns were eventually overcome, leading to the approval of the offensive by the Imperial General Headquarters on January 7, 1944.

Lieutenant General RenyeMutuguchi divided the three divisions viz; 15<sup>th</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> of 15000 troops each. Marching across the Naga Hills was the 31<sup>st</sup> Division under the command of Lieutenant General Kotuku Sato. 31<sup>st</sup> Division was further divided into three columns via; first via Homalin-Ukhrul-Maram-Kohimam second via Somra-Kharasom (here some went to Jessami) Mao- Kohima and third via Tamanthi- Layshi-Jessami-Phek-Kohima. Contingent of INA advanced along with them on its historic march “on to Delhi”. The INA was given independent charge by the Japanese generals to proceed to Kohima with instruction that with the fall of Imphal “to advance rapidly and cross the Brahmaputra into the heart of Bengal”. An understanding was made between General Kawebe and Bose wherein it was decided that the Japanese army and the INA would share equal status and would work on common strategies and common command. The INA would also function under its own military law. Lastly, the Indian tricolor alone would fly over liberated Indian territories. After the understanding, Bose in consultation with the military officers decided to set up a new Brigade known as No.1 Guerrilla Regiment which will comprise of soldiers from other three Brigades i.e. Gandhi, Azad and Nehru and that this Brigade should go into action first under the command of Shah Nawaz Khan. The soldiers gave it the name Subhash Brigade. This Brigade was given intensive military and spiritual training. A special operation group called Bahadur group was also set up to operate behind the enemy line.

Notably, the INA expressed disappointment when, instead of being positioned at the forefront of the attack, it was assigned to other minor tasks. In response, the Japanese General explained that the INA had been entrusted with sole responsibility for that sector to assess its efficiency. The INA soldiers demonstrated their battle worthiness in the Haka-Falam region, earning approval for their military skill and efficiency from the Japanese. Consequently, instructions were issued for the main body of the Brigade to advance towards Kohima. As a result, approximately one hundred fifty to three hundred INA men were respectively left at Haka-Falam, while the remainder marched towards Kohima. Commencing on March 15, 1944, the Japanese 31st Division crossed the Chindwin River and proceeded North-West along the jungle trails, covering a front of almost 60 miles. Despite the challenging nature of the march, significant progress was achieved. The Japanese advance was strategically organized into left, center, and right assault forces. The left assault force, commanded by Major General Shigesaburo Miyazaki and comprising two battalions of the 58th Regiment, took an unexpected detour on March 20th. Although their primary mission did not include it, they decided to eliminate the British post at Sangshak (Manipur) along their route of advance. The 50th Rajput Regiment valiantly defended their position for eight days, impeding the Japanese advance. The Imperial Army was taken aback by the enemy's unexpected fierceness. The Japanese not only faced delays but also discovered plans on the bodies of their fallen comrades, revealing a massive scheme to invade India.

At the helm of the Eastern command of the British Army was Lieutenant General William Slim, a discerning tactician. Recognizing the strategic significance of Dimapur as a major supply area, Slim requested its protection, understanding that the fall of Dimapur would have disastrous consequences. In an effort to strengthen the Imphal front, the 5th Indian Infantry Division was swiftly flown in from Arakan. Understanding the vulnerability of Kohima due to the lack of adequate forces, Slim promptly directed the 5th division to reinforce the defenses in Kohima.

On April 4, Kohima ridge was manned by Garrison Commander Colonel Richard Hugh who had just around 1500 fighting men with him as most were non-combatant and around 15000 Japanese soldiers bearing down on them. After just two days, the Japanese encircled Kohima. The Japanese attacked outlying defensive positions which had been given various names such as, Jail Hill, Field Supply Depot (FSD). The Japanese overran these positions suffering high casualty. After five days of vicious fighting, Kohima was transformed from a beautiful hill village into a ravaged battlefield. Fergel Keane commented; “in the jungle, covered with green, afternoon showers of bombing, vegetation scattered, turning to empty fields. Not a bird song to be heard”. On 13<sup>th</sup> April, the Japanese launched a major attack on Kohima. Accurate artillery firing from Jotsoma on Japanese positions proved very effective but the Japanese had the numbers and on 17<sup>th</sup>, they restarted their attack on Kohima. On 18<sup>th</sup> April a major artillery assaulted Japanese positions as men from the 1<sup>st</sup> Punjab regiment marched on to Kohima. The relief of Kohima was complete when the Royal Berkshire Regiment arrived on 20<sup>th</sup> April. Some of the heaviest fighting took place at a north end of Kohima ridge, around the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow and tennis court, in what became known as the **Battle of Tennis Court**. The tennis court became no man's land, with both sides so close to each other and pitching

grenades back and forth. Above all, the defenders were determined not to be taken alive by an enemy who had a well-deserved reputation for cruelty.

During the night of the 17th, the Japanese achieved a significant breakthrough by capturing the Deputy Commissioner's bungalow and the Kuki piquet, effectively dividing the garrison into two isolated sections. Despite the desperate situation, the defenders refrained from attacking Garrison Hill. As daylight broke, relief came when troops from the 161st Indian Brigade arrived to support and ultimately rescue the besieged garrison. Simultaneously, by April 11, the Fourteenth Army had amassed an equal number of troops in the area as the Japanese forces, setting the stage for a crucial turning point in the conflict. The British 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade took over the 161<sup>st</sup> brigade defensive positions allowing the former to launch an attack with air, artillery and armour towards Kohima on 18<sup>th</sup> April. The relief for Kohima was completed when Royal Berkshire Regiment arrived on April 20<sup>th</sup>. On the morning of April 23<sup>rd</sup> the British forces counter attacked to remove the Japanese from Kohima Hill. The attempted Japanese attack had been a dismal failure. The commander of the troops Sato wrote, "*We are losing many troops this way that before long we will be too thin on the ground to achieve anything*".

Sato faced the additional challenge of a severe shortage of food and supplies. A mistakenly sent telegram congratulating him on the capture of Kohima only added to his frustrations. In response, Sato bluntly stated, "It is not your congratulations we want but food and ammunition." The British, grappling with similar issues, received a setback when the Royal Air Force (RAF) announced plans to redeploy its aircraft to the Middle East, thereby ceasing air drops. Winston Churchill intervened, advising, "Let nothing go from the battle that you need for victory." By June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Lee Grant tanks were strategically positioned to launch an attack on the Japanese defenders. Faced with this threat, Sato ordered his men to withdraw. Mutaguchi, displeased with Sato's decision, sent a message threatening a court-martial if he retreated. Unfazed, Sato defiantly replied, "Do what you please." Japanese war correspondent Shizuo Maruyama described the grim situation at Kohima, stating, "We had no ammunition, no clothes, no food, no guns; we were starved and then crushed." Arthur Swinson, in his book "Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought," highlighted the Japanese predicament of complete supply deprivation throughout the war. Ultimately, the war concluded with a decisive victory for the Allied forces. The Japanese suffered an estimated 5,764 to 7,000 deaths or missing personnel, while the British lost 4,064 men in the intense and grueling Battle of Kohima.

### **THE WAR HAS ENDED BUT THE BATTLE IS FAR FROM OVER.**

At the conclusion of the war, the British India government brought the INA soldiers to trial on charges of waging war against king emperor. The prisoners could potentially face death penalty, life imprisonment or fine as punishment if found guilty. Between November 1945 and May 1946, around ten court-martials were held. The most celebrated trials were the joint court-martial of Colonel Prem Sahgal, Colonel Gurubaksh Singh Dhillon and Maj. General Shah Nawaz Khan held in a public trial at Red Fort. 11000 soldiers were released after forfeiture of their pay and allowance and never was inducted into the army. These trials attracted much publicity and sympathy for the defendants who were perceived as patriots in India and fought for the freedom of India from the British Empire. It shook the consciousness of thousands of patriotic Indians penetrating into the souls and the lives of Indian serving imperialism. The trials inspired protest and discontent among the Indian population, many of whom came to view defendants as revolutionaries who fought for their country. The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League both made the release of the defendants an important political issue. The movement marked the last major campaign in which both the Congress and the Muslim League aligned together. The tricolor and the green flag of the League were flown together as protest. Beyond the concurrent campaigns of Non-Cooperation and Non-violent protest, this spread to include mutinies and wavering support within the British Indian forces.

In January, a revolt erupted within the Royal Air Force, originating in Karachi and subsequently spreading to various parts of India, including the largest airbase at that time, Kanpur. This mutiny involved nearly 50,000 men across more than 60 RAF stations in India and Ceylon. Lasting from three to eleven days, the protests remained peaceful. The primary grievance was the slow mobilization of British troops to Britain, but the movement also exhibited clear signs of political and nationalist sentiments. In February 1946, a mutiny unfolded in the Royal Indian Navy. Approximately 20,000 sailors on 78 ships and shore establishments rebelled against British officers, initially identifying themselves as the "Indian National Navy" and offering a

left-handed salute to British officers. The rebellious ships hoisted three flags tied together, symbolizing unity among the Congress, Muslim League, and Communist Party of India, thereby downplaying communal issues among the mutineers. Protesters took to the streets of Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Vizag, and Karachi, carrying portraits of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose and chanting slogans such as "Release 11,000 INA prisoners" and "Jai Hind." The events underscored a growing wave of political and nationalist fervor in post-war India.

On February 19th, the Tricolor was hoisted on most ships and establishments, marking a significant moment in the mutiny. Alarmed by the uprising, Prime Minister Clement Atlee ordered a harsh crackdown, and Admiral J.H Godfrey conveyed a stern message through the air: "submit or perish." Subsequently, a revolt emerged in the British Indian Army at Jabalpur on February 26, 1946. The participants included members of the All Indian Signal Corps stationed at Jabalpur, with 1716 personnel involved in the mutiny. The immediate catalyst for the rebellion was the firing on the Naval mutiny in Bombay and the harsh treatment of INA prisoners. While the uprising was peaceful, it was forcefully quelled. Although the Jabalpur mutiny was initially perceived as less serious than the Naval mutiny, its consequences were profound. The earlier revolts in the Royal Indian Air Force and Royal Indian Navy, despite being more widespread and larger in scale, did not cause significant concern for the British. However, the mutiny in the British Indian Army, upon which they relied for both external and internal security, raised serious doubts about their trustworthiness. The notable and disconcerting factor for the British was the militant support the mutiny received from the British Indian Army. The highly charged atmosphere fueled by the stories of the Indian National Army (INA) and the Free India Legion became so inflammatory that the British government, fearing widespread revolts not only in India but across the empire, imposed restrictions on the broadcast of INA stories and trials. The events marked a critical turning point in the dynamics of colonial rule in India. These mutinies left a deep impact on the British, worried about the probability of larger insurrection, the then Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, sent several secret cables to London discussing about the quick transfer of power from British hands to Indians.

Swasti Sarkar in his paper "*How Gandhi, Patel and Nehru colluded with British to suppress naval Mutiny of 1946*" mentioned that, while the revolt of Navy and Air Force was widespread, the revolt of the army was particularly dangerous. General V.K. Singh writes "*though the mutiny at Jubbulpore was at that time not considered as serious as navy mutiny, its repercussions were immense...*" "*This set alarm bells ringing from Delhi to London and doubts began to be expressed on the steadfastness of the Army. Ultimately it forced the British to reach a political settlement with the political parties and quit India.*" This view was corroborated by Mansergh "*It is pertinent to remember that one of the compelling reason for the departure of the British from India was the apprehension that the loyalty of the Indian armed forces was doubtful.*" P.V Chakraborty, former Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court in conversation with Clement Atlee on 30th March, 1976 asked Atlee on why British left India in hurry? Atlee cited several reasons, the most important of which were the INA activities of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, which weakened the very foundations of the British Empire in India. Michael Edward in his book, the last years of British India says, "*Its slowly dawn upon the British government of India. That the backbone of the government rule the British Indian Army might now no longer be trustworthy. The ghost of Subhash Chandra Bose like Hamlets father walk the battle ground of the red fort.... And this suddenly amplified figure overrode the conference that would lead to independent*". Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in an interview with BBC in 1955 said, "*From my analysis two things that led the labour party to take a decision to free India on the National Army that was raised by Subhash Chandra Bose. The British had been ruling the country in the firm believe that whatever may happen in the country or whatever the politician do they will never be able to change the loyalty of soldiers that was one probe they were carrying the form of administration that was dash to pieces. They found that soldiers could be seduce to form of party, a battalion to blow of the British.*"

## CONCLUSION

When India achieved independence in 1947, little credit was given to Bose and his Indian National Army, but as more evidence begin to emerge, it becomes clear that without the heroic sacrifice of thousands of Indians in the service of the INA, India's independence could have been delayed. Britain quickened the pace of India's independence not so much because of Gandhi's Civil disobedience movement or other measures taken by Indian National Congress but because the impact of INA had on the psyche of British India's armed forces.

**Martyrdom is not the end but the beginning of a legend****Jai Hind****REFERENCES**

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