

Remembering the Childhood Days in Burma and My Ideal Hero Netaji, The Supreme Commander of Azad Hind Fauj

K. S. VALDIYA

It was a piece of paradise on earth—the hill station Kalaw where I was born and grew up. A beautiful hill station in Southern Shan States at the altitude of 4500 feet above sea level, the town was surrounded by forested hills and mountain ranges. In the pine-forests in the hill ranges, there were quite more than a hundred and twenty beautiful bungalows, each with its garden, tennis court and swimming pool, where lived Britishers. In the mountains covered by dense rain forests there were hamlets of a number of tribals, including *Palaung*, *Padaung* and *Tongsu*.

Local people

The beautifully-planned township was the home of Shans, Chinese, Burmese and Indians. The gentle, amiable and peace-loving Shans have close affinities with the people of the neighbouring countries—China, Laos and Thailand. The Shans were very religious people, devoted to Buddha, and they revered *Bauddha Bikkhus* which thronged the town every now and then in the morning. Women not only dominated the society but also were in the forefront of trade and business and adept in household chores.

Indian community

Coming from all parts of India and

Nepal, the Indians formed a very large proportion of the population of Kalaw. They were traders and professionals. The business was in their hands. They held high positions in administration as well. They were engineers, doctors and lawyers. From shoemakers, barbers, carpenters and masons to *chaiwalas* and *mithaiwalas*, the Indians occupied important places in the whole scheme of things. All petty workers and casual labourers were from the poverty-stricken parts of India. The Nepalis reared cows and sold milk.

The Indians had started coming to Burma after 1887, when the British established their firm control on the country. The province Shan State and Kalaw became the preferred destination of immigrants when in 1910 the work for laying down railway-line from the foothills Thazi (near Mandalay) to the high Shan plateau was started. Labourers and skilled workers came from Nepal, Uttarakhand, U.P., Punjab, Bihar, Bengal, Odisha and Tamil Nadu. They came in hordes.

Cosmopolitan society

Ours was a close-knit community of all Indians, united firmly with the bond of friendship and camaraderie. There was cordiality amongst communities and music

REMEMBERING THE CHILDHOOD DAYS IN BURMA AND MY IDEAL HERO
NETAJI, THE SUPREME COMMANDER OF AZAD HIND FAUJ

in their lives. We spoke a melange language containing words from Hindi, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi and Tamil. We celebrated festivals of all communities with equal fervour, and joined the Shans and Burmese in their versions of Holi and Diwali. Their Diwali was simply spectacular, and the gaiety in their Holi was incredible.

My grandfather was a kind and compassionate person. Every immigrant who came and stayed with our family even for a few days left with a pair of clothing and Rs. 50 as a seed money for launching his career.

War breaks out

Then came the devastating tempest—the country was thrown into severe convulsion. The Japanese had won Singapore in February 1942. Overrunning Malaya, they rushed towards Burma. Rangoon and Mandalay were bombed, triggering panicky exodus. From southern Burma, the government brought thousands of Indian labourers working in their mines and dumped them on the sides of rail tracks in middle Burma. In the soaring heat without shade of trees, without water, and without food they all died of cholera that had broken out with uncontrolled fury.

The Britishers and all those Indians who had resources, money, power and connections scrambled to take aeroplane flights to India, and the less fortunate people trudged long surface routes to reach Manipur and Sadiya across the formidable Indo-Burma Border Ranges. Many hundred perished on their ways to India.

The British left Burma under the control of the Chinese army of General Chiangkai Shek, who were retreating northwards to Yunnan, the southern province of China.

The entire rail and road transport systems were in the iron control of the Chinese army.

Time without government

In our town Kalaw there was no government left, no police, no one to run trains and buses, and no one to man hospitals and schools. The police armoury had been looted and robbers and desperadoes roamed freely—robbing and looting. Not knowing how to save ourselves, we all left the town to seek the sanctuary of bungalows abandoned by the Britishers. Without enough food and without resources to survive, and with the threats of robbers looming large, we lived in the shadow of fear and waited for the Japanese to come.

Coming of Japanese

They came; and in no time established firm and efficient control on the machinery of law and order. Lawlessness was put down with iron hand, and an incredibly efficient administration was put in place. Strict rules for sanitation and environment were sternly enforced. They took keen interest in the hygiene of the people, and in the integrity of the forest environment.

My grandfather, Lachhman Singh, was a worldly-wise man who knew the art of befriending people. He opened a milk bar in the varanda of his general store. Milk was brought from the herd of his own cows looked after by a Nepali Brahman some 10-15 km away. Hot milk was served free of charge to every Japanese soldier that passed by the road. The soldiers liked *miraku*, as they called it, and their officers were pleased.

The Japanese held Mahatma Gandhi in great esteem. Whenever a Japanese soldier saw a picture of Gandhiji hanging on the wall, he would bow his head

low and utter ‘*Ganji! Ganji!*’!!

There was peace and security in the society. There was cordiality amongst all Indians. There was a large community of Bengalese in town, most of them living in the railway colony. Our family had special bonds with the families of De, Ghosh and Bose. The young girls of the Ghosh and Bose families were very talented and well versed in dances and *Rabindra Sangeet*. Together we used to organize dramas, cultural programmes and festive *pujas*—the *pujas* in our *Thakurbari* manned and managed by *pandits* (priests) from our home *area* in eastern Uttarakhand.

There was only one hospital with a sole doctor from Tamil Nadu. But no medicines. There were no schools, no books and no stationery. As a matter of fact, everything made in and imported from India was unavailable. The sole Hindi school used to function off and on whenever somebody volunteered to teach. And teach well they did.

The Japanese had in the beginning opened their school for a couple of months to teach the public how to understand and speak Japanese. I too acquired a smattering of that sweet language.

Netaji assumes the command

One day in mid-May, 1943, I heard my father Deb Singh animatedly speaking with his friend Iyer: Subhash Chandra Bose had landed in Tokyo, coming all the way from Berlin in Germany in a submarine. He met Emperor Hirohito and the Prime Minister General Tojo. The General assured his government’s full help to the Indians in their fight for freedom of India. He also declared 30 lakh Indians living in Thailand, Malaya, Singapore and Burma as free citizens of India, who will have their own independent

government and an independent army.

Accompanied by Ras Bihari Bose and Abid Hasan, Subhash Bose arrived at Singapore on 4 July, 1943, and assumed the command of the Indian Independence Army (INA) which Ras Bihari Bose had earlier formed with Capt. Mohan Singh as its chief. The Supreme Commander of Azad Hind Fauj became the NETAJI of three million Indians of south-east Asia.

Azad Hind Fauj

The 50,000 Indian Prisoners of War from British Army, belonging to various regiments such as Baloch, Pathan, Sikh, Garhwal, Kumaun, Gorkha, Rajput, Jat, Maratha and Tamil, were completely amalgamated and regrouped into four brigades—the Gandhi Brigade, the Nehru Brigade, the Azad Brigade and the Subhash Brigade. Every group had a common kitchen and only one place for prayers, irrespective of the religion of the soldiers and their officers. Netaji used to go to kitchens and dine with the soldiers, exchanging views and pleasantries.

A Government was also formed with Netaji as President of the Provisional Government of Free India or Azad Hind Araji Hukumat. The cabinet ministers were A. C. Chatterjee, S. A. Iyer, Lakshmi Swaminathan, A. D. Loknathan, Gen. Mohammad Kiyani, J. K. Bhonsale, Gen. Ehsan Qader, Gen. Shah Nawaz Khan, M. S. Bhagat and Gulzara Singh. Free India’s Azad Hind Bank also came into existence. That was the time when the Burmese Government was headed by Dr Ba Maw and his deputy was General Aung San, father of the Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

I cannot tell you how rapturous and proud we all felt that day—30 December, 1943—when Netaji unfurled the tricolour

REMEMBERING THE CHILDHOOD DAYS IN BURMA AND MY IDEAL HERO
NETAJI, THE SUPREME COMMANDER OF AZAD HIND FAUJ

flag at Port Blair in the Andaman Island—the first ever freed soil of India. The Japanese had handed over the Andaman and Nicobar islands to the Provisional Indian Government. These islands were renamed *Shaheed* and *Swaraj* respectively.

Netaji Raj

In our town Kalaw, De Babu, an engineer by profession, was elected president of the local chapter of the India Independence League. A lawyer from Chittagong or Dhaka, Mr Kibria, was made the general secretary.

Declared free and, feeling liberated, we all wore with great pride two badges on our lapels, one a button-size badge with the photo of Netaji and the other with a picture of the tricolour flag. We greeted each other, big or small, older or younger, with the salutation *Jai Hind!*

Then came two representatives from the INA. A public meeting was held and my grandfather presided over the proceedings. Major Barot was eloquent, passionate and earnest. He repeated what Netaji had spoken in a broadcast sometime earlier. Netaji said:

‘Give me blood, I promise you freedom!’

‘Friends! Our aim is to unfurl tricolour flag in Lal Qila.

Therefore our slogan is *Chalo Dilli.*’

‘I cannot give you anything other than hunger, thirst, suffering and death. But you have my words: We will Win our Freedom.’

Capt. Natha Singh bluntly put in: ‘Every family has to send a young man for the Indian National Army.

If you cannot send your boys, give money, give gold, silver; donate property or whatever you have. Long Live Revolution.’

My grandfather could not send his only son to join the freedom fighters, so he

donated all that he had earned during post-Japanese invasion—and every piece of jewellery that my grandmother and mother owned.

That was the golden time of our lives in Burma. We, children, used to flock to the school not to recite morning prayers but to sing the national anthem, which Netaji himself had got written, and for which the music was composed by a Himachali Nepali Capt. Ram Singh. We also lustily sang another song.

Launching of war for freedom

One day we heard from a Hawaldar of Azad Hind Fauj that INA has launched the war of independence by opening two fronts. That was perhaps early February, 1944. The southern front commanded by Gen. Shah Nawaz Khan marched along the Akyab-Arakan coast aiming to reach Dhaka. The northern front was commanded by Col. Shaukat Ali. The objective was to liberate Manipur-Nagaland and reach Calcutta.

The freedom fighters secured the freedom of Manipur, hoisted the tricolour at Moirang for the first time ever in FREE INDIA on 29 March, 1944. Soon after Kohima in Nagaland was also freed. It became the seat of the government of free India. A branch of Azad Hind Bank was also opened, and for the first time the currency of free India was put into circulation. Free India's postal stamps were also issued.

Alas! Indian history is silent about that epochal event. It was the land of Manipur and Nagaland that first ever won freedom from the British rule. It was here where free India's flag first fluttered—it is here where the seat of free India's Government was first made.

One day we heard that Netaji had addressed the nation through a radio

broadcast. In a choked voice he addressed Mahatma Gandhi as *Rashtrapita* and sought his blessings for his struggles for India's freedom. That was 6 July, 1944. It is a travesty that neither our Government, our *netas* nor our people know who first called Gandhiji as *Rashtrapita*, Father of the Nation. It was Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose who first called him *Rashtrapita* on 6 July, 1944.

Darshan of Netaji

It was late winter of 1945—possibly February last week. Netaji came to our town. A public meeting was organized in an abandoned church. The large hall was packed to its capacity. I cannot forget that sublime sight. It is etched deep in my mind as if it happened just the other day. In front of the audience stood a divine figure in Supreme Commander's uniform. His face was radiant with resolute determination, courage and hope. Words flowed from his mouth like music and resonated in the hearts of everyone sitting in the hall. It was so mesmerizing that I did not hear anything what he said. Later that night my father summarized what Netaji had said. Netaji said:

'I am often asked "what shall we do, what shall we make when we are free". Friends, what we have to do and make are matters we shall think about later. Right now we have just to become Indian—the Indian whose religion is Indian, whose caste is Indian, whose culture is Indian; whose language is Indian, and whose slogan is "Jai Hind".'

Bombardments and holocaust

Soon after, the sky over Kalaw used to be filled night after night with the planes—bombers and fighters of the British-

American army. Kalaw being the divisional headquarters of the Japanese army, it was a special target for the Allied forces. Although the Japanese army lived in faraway places, the planes roared over the heads of the civilians in the town. We were forced to spend whole nights and sometimes days in air-raid shelters—in covered trenches—which every households had built for safety. I remember spending nights in our trench and singing lustily with my pal Luri:

न चाहूँ मान दुनिया में, न चाहूँ स्वर्ग की जाना।
मुझे यही वर दे माता कि रहुँ मैं भारत पै दीवाना।

It was too much. Our family retreated to a makeshift hut built in the nearby hill covered with dense pine forest. There the first thing we did was to dig a trench and cover it with logs and mud. One day, possibly sometime in April 1944 at 11 forenoon, the sky was filled by scores of double-bodied bombers. Then followed the seemingly unending rain of bombs. This went on for 20 to 30 minutes or maybe less. The town was reduced to masses of rubbles. I recall seeing hundreds of screaming, wailing, bleeding, limping people fleeing the houses that had collapsed. Some were carried in makeshift stretchers to the hospital which had also been partially bombed. The fire spread to the hills covered with dry pine needles, to our hut and air-raid shelter.

The bombardment triggered mass exodus. My grandfather had a farm house in a deep wood some 10-15 km south of the town. Taking along all our neighbours we made a beeline to that village, carrying on our backs and heads whatever we could. It was a long weary trudge to the distant village in the dense jungle. In no time a colony of makeshift huts appeared in the stepped farmland of my grandfather. For every household, the first priority was to dig

a trench with covered top as air-raid shelter.

Very soon we realized that we were living at a place which lay between the invading British-American army and the retreating Japanese forces—the two occupying the wooded mountain ranges. We were in the crossfire of two combatant forces—the guns booming all the time. The British-American fighter planes would not spare even the habitation of refugees that we were. I vividly remember one afternoon when we children were playing on the dirt road where a truck loaded with salt was parked. A fighter plane swooped down low and repeatedly strafed the truck. We had to lie prostrate in a gutter filled with black muck. Realizing that the truck was the cause of machine-gunning, my grandfather got the body of his truck dismantled completely, leaving just the steel chassis on the road.

Days passed by even as we got used to the booms of guns. We had exhausted our supply of food. For sometime the family managed to get rice in exchange of salt from the tribals Palaung who lived in the surrounding mountain. If the war were to prolong, how would we survive? That was uppermost in the mind of everybody. My grandfather had an idea. He mobilized the people of the colony and embarked on farming on the mountain slope covered with dense rain forest. Trees and shrubs of a few acres were felled and left to dry up, and then later set on fire in order to reduce them to ashes. The burnt patch of slope was then dug up and the seeds of an inferior quality of lentil—*jhilang dal*—were sown. Somebody asked ‘Why *jhilang*? Why not paddy?’ Grandfather replied: ‘In this steeply sloping ground, paddy is unlikely to grow. Even if it can grow, wherefrom can we get paddy seeds? *Jhilang dal* is all that we have. When we reap the harvest, we may well be able to

survive hunger that is looming large’.

Return of the British

One day at noon the sky over our town Kalaw turned crimson red—it seemed to have become an inferno. That was the second attack on that civilian town. The bombers had dropped hundreds of incendiary napalm bombs. Nothing was left except a mosque, a *thakurbari* (temple) and an Arya Samaj Bhavan, besides pagodas—all in damaged condition.

Next day just about the lunch time our hut was surrounded by armed Japanese soldiers—desperate, dishevelled and hungry. The group leader demanded food. My father, who had come out in his undershirt and *lungi*, casually responded, ‘We don’t have any’.

But the smell of cooking vegetables was the give-away. Wild with rage at this sheer lie, the soldier whipped out his dagger and rushed towards my father. He took to his heels. Along with him fled the whole family. They were later joined by all the people who were living in the colony. They all ran out with whatever they were wearing. Another exodus, this time to the town, which was now a mass of rubble and ashes. We found shelter in a solitary building—the Arya Samaj Bhawan in the northeastern part of the town.

In a day or two, the British army entered the town. Column after column of jeeps, armoured cars, trucks and tanks marched past our camp. Out of curiosity we children used to stand on the roadside to watch the moving convoys. Sometimes the soldiers flung at us loaves of bread, or tins of jam or butter, or cans of milk. Once, a *milkmaid* can fell at my feet. The next morning the tea that grandmother prepared had the content of milk.

‘Where did you get the milk for tea’, my grandfather asked my grandma.

‘Kharak got a can of milk’.

I was called and asked. Hearing my answer he flew into rage.

‘You *badmash!* You shameless blackguard! You begged the enemy for milk?’

I explained. But he would not listen. And I cried and cried. Since then I have never ever sought any favour from the white man—from any *gaurang*.

The Japanese currency was demonetized. Being ardent nationalist, our family had not saved the British currency of the pre-war times. How will we get our food? How will we start our business! My grandfather was discussing the problem with his son and two nephews. My mother, who was hearing their conversation, quietly said, ‘I have hidden some British notes in a cloth package under the floor of the hut in the farmhouse’. The hut we had left behind. A few daring youngsters ventured to go back there and retrieve the hidden package. Drenched with moisture, the package contained Rs. 250 worth of soiled notes.

With that capital my grandfather set up a tea stall on the road much frequented by the Indian soldiers of the British army. My uncles prepared tea and *pakora*. My father served them to the guests, we two brothers washed the plates and glasses and grandfather regaled the visitors with pep talk. Soon they earned enough money to start up their old business. Grandfather managed to secure a lucrative contract to rebuild railway station and culverts in a 33-mile tract.

Luck smiled on him once again. We brothers were admitted to a convent school to study English with Burmese. Within a year, Burma was once again in the throes of

agitations. Under the leadership of General Aung San, the Burmese had begun agitations for freedom from the British rule. There were strikes, there were strifes and disruptions. Schools were made special targets of agitation for introduction of Burmese language as the medium of instruction.

That decision

It was early February 1947. The evening was cold. Family members and friends of the neighbourhood sat besides coal fire. Grandfather had just returned from his visit to the site where he was rebuilding a bomb-damaged bridge. He blurted out:

‘I have decided to return to my home in India.’

Everybody was aghast. Whatever happened to this man who has made Kalaw his home for 36 long years! My father ventured to ask: ‘Baba! What has happened that makes you suddenly to return home?’ ‘I must go, and go very soon. My two grandsons will come along with me.’

‘Baba! You want to return to India at a time when we are doing very well in our business, there is joy and affluence in the family, and the children’s education is on right track.’

My grandfather responded: ‘For this very reason I want to take the children to India.’

That was an enigma. Everybody looked at his face with gaping mouths. What does he mean? He broke his silence to say, ‘Thirty-six years ago when I first came here, I was penniless. I reared up cows, sold their milk. Took up the job of postman. Simultaneously, I used to carry baggages like a hawker and sold things to labourers working in remote jungles. One day I became wealthy. The Japanese invaded our

REMEMBERING THE CHILDHOOD DAYS IN BURMA AND MY IDEAL HERO
NETAJI, THE SUPREME COMMANDER OF AZAD HIND FAUJ

town. I lost everything. I was reduced to a pauper. Then came the *raj* of Netaji. Renewed my efforts and became rich. British-American returned with vengeance and heaped complete devastation. Whatever I had earned was burnt down. Right now I am rich again. But who knows I may become a cypher again.'

Sparks were flying from the coal fire. Sitting around, everybody sat as if paralyzed. Grandfather continued: '*Riches come and riches go away. They do not stay. The one thing that stays is knowledge. I was not able to get education, therefore could not earn knowledge. I was not able to get my son educated, so he too was deprived of knowledge. I want my grandsons to earn knowledge. For knowledge they need to have good education. I don't see good education in this strife-torn place. Therefore, I must take them to homeland for education. When they acquire knowledge, they will become somebody.*'

Coming to homeland

So we took the train to Rangoon on 20 March, 1947. From Rangoon a flight of a dakota plane brought us to Kolkata.

It was a hotel on the Harrison Road where we stayed. As we were preparing to leave for the Howrah Railway Station, there was loud noise and commotion. I rushed out to the balcony. On the one side of the crossroad there was a large number of people clad in *lungis* and *pyjamas* and white caps shouting *Allah-O-Akbar*, and on the other side, a crowd of people wearing *dhotis* and *kurtas* and shouting *Har Har Mahādev!* They were pelting pieces of bricks and broken bottles at each other and

gesticulating wildly. Standing at the crossroad, the police fired tear gas shells. The atmosphere was filled with gas that made our eyes burn and water profusely.

'What is going on grandpa?'

'There is a riot.'

'What is riot?'

'Don't you see, the Hindus and the Muslims are fighting with each other.'

'Why are they fighting?'

'Don't know!'

There was a tone of exasperation in his reply.

To our luck, a daring Sikh taxi driver agreed to take us out to the railway station. On the way grandfather explained:

'The quarrel starts on the manner of worship. One says, your method of worship is not correct. The other says, you do not perform your worship properly. Both believe in God. Both say that God is one. But then they fight and kill one another on the manner of worship.'

In the train to Bareilly as I lay down on the berth my mind was in terrific turmoil. Netaji told us that Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians in India all live in harmony, in mutual regards. But what I saw in Calcutta was very different. Perhaps Calcutta is not that India which Netaji had talked about. Perhaps that India lay beyond Calcutta, I thought.

Ladies and Gentlemen! For the last 70 years I have been searching and looking for that India that Netaji had envisioned—the India where live Indians whose religion is Indian, whose caste is Indian, whose culture is Indian, whose language is Indian, and whose slogan is *Jai Hind*. ■

* Dr K. S. Valdiya is Honorary Professor of Geodynamics, Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, Bengaluru. He was awarded Padma Bhushan in 2015 and the prestigious S. S. Bhatnagar Prize in 1976.