

## The Heroes of the INA Trials



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*Editor's note: This story is an expanded version of an excerpt from the author's book Azaadi!: stories and histories of the Indian subcontinent after Independence, Abhinav, Delhi 2005. It is reproduced here with the author's permission.*

The Second World War ended in 1945 when I was a teenager, although I'm not sure whether the term 'teenager' was invented then. Anyway, the question often discussed in our home was: Were the Indian officers who went over to Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (INA) heroes or traitors? The arguments and counter-arguments got very heated because my father was a King's Commissioned Officer in the Royal Indian Air Force, and was loyal to his commission. Further, he had served on the Burma front and did not approve of the Japanese army because he was aware of the brutality meted out by the Japanese army to its prisoners of war. (*Editor's note: The INA was working closely with the Japanese army.*)

The military mind is clear: These officers had willingly and gladly accepted commissions from the King Emperor. They had taken an oath of absolute loyalty. They had been disloyal and so they were traitors. Therefore, they ought to be court-martialled, found guilty, and shot.

Our home, on Lahore's Ferozepur Road, was open to all creeds, castes and ethnicities. Civilians and military personnel would drop in and the heated discussions always centred on the INA. I heard all the views expressed. No one doubted the intelligence and integrity of Neta-ji. (*Editor's note: Subhash Bose was commonly called Neta-ji*). However, Bose's alliance with the Japanese was regarded as somewhat naive. Surely, he must have known that the Japanese Empire was far more fascist than the British Empire.

My school mates were, on the whole, too busy with their books. However, I was fired by the discussions I heard at home and got a few of my trusted friends interested as well. We kept this a secret from my father, since he would have said: "Boys, keep out of politics and stick to your books."

In November 1945, the British decided to hold the first treason trial of Indian Army officers who had gone over to the INA in Delhi's Red Fort. It gave a sense of history to the proceedings. It also showed that the British, when it came to it, could be motivated by the base vice of revenge. Subhash Bose had promised that the INA would soon proclaim India's independence from the Red Fort, from where the Mughals once ruled the subcontinent. And so, in order to prove to the Indian people that it was the British who ruled India, the Red Fort was chosen as the court where the leading INA prisoners would be subjected to the due processes of British law.

This was at a time when the Muslim League, led by the implacable Jinnah, was on the threshold of winning Pakistan through the division of Mother India on Hindu-Muslim lines of demarcation. But the

collective consciousness of India was roused by the Red Fort trial. Every Indian, irrespective of religion, felt that the ruling power was out for vengeance. All Indians felt spat upon.

I can still feel, to this day, the hatred for British rule emanating from the very soil of India.

To rub in the insult, the British authorities arraigned a Hindu (Prem Kumar Sehgal), a Muslim (Shah Nawaz Khan) and a Sikh (Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon) for the show trial. Overnight, these INA generals became national heroes. All over the country Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were united in the curses that they heaped upon their rulers.

One of the defence lawyers was Jawaharlal Nehru. The defence lost its case and the three 'traitors' were pronounced guilty. However, thanks to the foresight of the Indian Army's Commander-in-Chief Auchinleck their sentences were commuted, and they were released.

Sehgal, Shah Nawaz and Dhillon walked out of the Red Fort like conquerors rather than like beaten men. Superstitious Indians, and there are many of them, started saying that Bose had redeemed his pledge even though he was dead. The INA had, after all, reached the Red Fort.

The youth of India took these men to their hearts. They were welcomed and hailed all over the country.

Being stirred as well, I went to hear them speak at a crowded public meeting when they came to Lahore in December 1945. There were thousands who greeted them at the historic Minto Park. In unison they chanted loudly:

*“Chaalis crore-on ki awaaz! (Forty crore people shout in unison!) (Editor's note: India's population was 40 crores – 400 million - at that time.)  
Sehgal - Dhillon - Shah Nawaz!!”*

It was heady stuff and my few friends and I (all there because we'd skipped school) really felt that we were now a part of Indian history.

The three were sitting at a table on which there was a jug of water; but only one glass tumbler. It was a warm afternoon and the three drank from the same glass. A small thing, you might say. But in India – at a time when Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were often at each others' throats – this was potently symbolic. A rare sense of unity and communal harmony permeated the vast crowd.

The high caste Hindu Sehgal, the Muslim Shah Nawaz, the Sikh Dhillon; all drinking water out of the same glass. It was then that I saw the living spirit of Bose. No, he was not dead. He lived on through the simple actions of these men.

Over half a century later, I ask myself: How many Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs are there today who would drink water out of the same glass?❖

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