



# REVISITING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THREE UNSUNG MANIPURIS TO THE INDIAN NATIONAL ARMY (INA) MOVEMENT

<sup>1</sup>Maisnam Luwangningthou, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Kabirdash Mayengbam

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor

<sup>1</sup>Department of History,

<sup>1</sup>Dhanamanjuri University, Imphal, India

*Abstract:* The intentions and attitudes of the British colonial policy contributed to the rise of nationalism in India. Such a rise of nationalism gradually turned into the form of the freedom struggle. Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, a great patriot, organised armed volunteers to make an independent India from British colonial rule. As a part of his movements, INA was established in collaboration with the Japanese forces during the Second World War period. In Manipur, an INA headquarters was also established, and the Tricolour Flag was hoisted on April 14th at Moirang Kangla, Moirang, Bishnupur District, Manipur. There existed many Manipuri volunteers who actively supported the INA movement in Manipur. Among them, P. Tomal Singh, Ringshi Keishing, and H. Nilamani Singh supported the movement and worked actively for the organisation of the INA movement in Manipur. Based on primary and secondary sources, this paper intends to throw light on the historical landmarks of their role and contributions to the freedom movement of Manipur as well as India as a whole.

**IndexTerms - Subash Chandra Bose, INA, Second World War, Manipur.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 emerged as a well-organised movement in India. It took a crucial role in the struggle for the independence of the state. Apart from it, different groups viz. The Indian National Army (INA) was against British colonial rule. With the help of Japanese forces, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose led the INA movement for the liberation of India against British colonial rule. When he reached Singapore in July 1943, he planned to take over Manipur as an initial occupation of India for independence. On 23<sup>rd</sup> October, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose declared war against the Allied forces. Being a hilly region, both the parties that were attacking and defending forces faced difficulties in creating their strategic positions. Air supply was the only way to reinforce the supplies and communication at that time. Lt. Gen Mutaguchi Renye, who was overall in charge of the attacking Japanese forces in Manipur, pushed his tired and hungry soldiers more and more despite the monsoons looming large just about a month later. Accordingly, by the middle of April 1944, the Japanese forces had full control over the Moirang and Bishnupur areas. Then, Col. A. Malik hoisted the Tri-colour Flag on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April at Moirang Kangla. By the end of April, many local members, namely Mairembam Koireng Singh, Hemam Nilamani Singh, Ringshi Keishing, etc., joined the INA movement, taking a key role in the freedom struggle of India under the umbrella of INA. Having support from Japan, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose established the INA headquarters at Rangoon in 1943 for the freedom struggle of India. Bose, along with Ras Bihari Bose, left Tokyo for Singapore, and on July 4, the league members welcomed him at the Cathey Theatre and readily accepted Subhash Chandra Bose as the new leader of the league. Thereafter, the Japanese agreed to provide training and equipment for no more than 30000 personnel. They began to march to Delhi. In addition to the three divisions, separate intelligence and field propaganda units had been organised for the three divisions. By December 1943, four units of 250 men each had been attached for training to the Japanese divisions that would take part in the Kohima and Imphal campaigns. In the middle of October 23, 1943, Subhash Chandra Bose declared war against Britain. In March 1944, the Japanese forces launched an operation in North East India, dividing the 15<sup>th</sup> Army of Japanese forces into three divisions.

The intentions and attitudes of the British colonial policy contributed to the rise of nationalism in India. Such a rise of nationalism gradually turned into the form of the freedom struggle. Netaji Subash Chandra Bose, a great patriot, organised armed volunteers to make an independent India from British colonial rule. As a part of his movements, INA was established in collaboration with the Japanese forces during the Second World War period. In Manipur, an INA headquarters was also established, and the Tricolour Flag was hoisted on April 14th at Moirang Kangla, Moirang, Bishnupur District, Manipur. There existed many Manipuri volunteers who actively supported the INA movement in Manipur. Among them, P. Tomal Singh, Ringshi Keishing, and

H. Nilamani Singh supported the movement and worked actively to organise the INA movement in Manipur. Based on primary and secondary sources, this paper intends to throw light on the historical landmarks of their role and contributions to the freedom movement of Manipur as well as India as a whole.

## NEED OF THE STUDY.

While the INA's national significance is well recognised, the contributions of regional participants—especially Manipuri volunteers such as P. Tomal Singh, Ringshi Keishing, and H. Nilamani Singh, remain largely undocumented in mainstream historical narratives. The hoisting of the Tricolour at Moirang Kangla represents a landmark event symbolising Manipur's direct involvement in the armed phase of the freedom movement. By using primary and secondary sources, this study seeks to preserve local historical memory, ensure due recognition to lesser-known freedom fighters, and integrate Manipur's experience into the broader national history. Such research is essential for a more inclusive, balanced, and comprehensive understanding of India's struggle for independence.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the primary and secondary sources, the paper adopts historical research to trace the history of Manipuri volunteers who actively supported the INA movement in Manipur, especially focusing on P. Tomal Singh, Ringshi Keishing, and H. Nilamani Singh, who supported the movement and worked actively for the organisation of the INA movement in Manipur. This paper intends to throw light on the historical landmarks of their role and contributions to the freedom movement of Manipur as well as India as a whole.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION MANIPUR AND INA

Although the King of Manipur extended active support to the British government, the local population of both the hill and valley regions of Manipur provided substantial assistance to the Indian National Army (INA) and the Japanese forces in various ways. This support included the collection of large quantities of food supplies, participation in espionage activities, mobilisation of youths for wartime involvement, dissemination of INA pamphlets, and communication networks among local communities. Several members of the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha openly supported Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose by joining the INA movement against British rule. One such individual, Naki Ahmad Choudhury, who later became a full member of the INA, had previously served as a local soldier in the British Indian Army. He recorded the hardships faced by Japanese forces in securing food and local cooperation and witnessed the role of Colonel S. A. Malik in mobilising support from the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha and the villagers of Thanga.

As Manipur was a princely state, the Indian National Congress was not permitted to operate there, and even Mahatma Gandhi was denied entry. Nevertheless, the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, whose ideology and objectives closely aligned with those of the Congress, responded positively to Netaji's appeal. Thirteen members of the Mahasabha secretly travelled to Moirang, where they joined residents to formulate strategies for advancing the independence movement. Their activities included organising food supplies for the Indo-Japanese forces and conducting intelligence operations. Villagers voluntarily contributed provisions, transporting them by headloads and bullock carts to support the advancing forces. Prominent figures who played an active role in the valley region included Mairembam Koireng, Naki Ahmad Choudhury, Hemam Nilamani, M. Jatra Singh, M. Ahanjao Singh, Mutum Amuba, Laishram Irabot Singh, O. Keina Devi, Sarungbam Ibohal Singh, Th. Angou Singh and Laishram Guna Singh. The residence of Hemam Nilamani was converted into an INA headquarters.

On 14 April 1944, Colonel Shaukat Ali Malik ceremonially hoisted the Indian Tricolour at Moirang Kangla, symbolising the declaration of India's independence and the liberation of Moirang and nearby villages from British colonial rule. Additionally, women from Manipur joined the Rani Jhansi Regiment of the INA under the leadership of Lakshmi Sehgal. The announcement was enthusiastically received by the local population, who believed themselves to be among the first liberated people of India, despite many families being forced to evacuate Moirang and seek refuge in Thanga, Sendra, and Mamang Ching. The people continued to voluntarily supply provisions to the Indo-Japanese forces, with the campaign being led by Shri Kuman Kanglen Singh of Moirang.

### RINGSHI KEISHING

Ringshi Keishing, a freedom fighter from the Naga community of Manipur, did not personally meet Subhas Chandra Bose, but served in the Indian National Army under Lieutenant Colonel Shah Nawaz Khan, a close associate of Bose and one of the defendants in the 1946 INA trials. Around March 1943–44, Ringshi was reportedly the only freedom fighter among the Nagas of Manipur. Initially, the British recruited volunteers from Manipur as guides for the Assam Rifles, offering monthly salaries. Ringshi was approached to join but was later arrested along the Indo–Burma border by Japanese forces and the INA. Taken to Kontong in Myanmar, his knowledge of border areas and proficiency in English and Hindi led to his induction into the INA with the rank of Lieutenant.

He participated in several battles, including engagements at Schakok Camp (Ango Ching hill range), Finch Corner, Kangkhui, and Sangshak. Ringshi recalled strong confidence among Japanese and INA forces about victory, and noted that Indian prisoners held by the Japanese for supporting the British were released and inducted into the INA. In later life, Ringshi faced serious health challenges, including heart surgery with a pacemaker, without receiving financial assistance. He has a large family, with over 50 grandchildren, but none of his children are employed. Despite limited means, he wished his family to remember his contribution to India's independence. In recognition of his service, he was invited seven times to the annual freedom fighters' reception in New Delhi hosted by the President's office. He receives a central government pension of ₹15,000 per month, but only ₹500 per month from the Manipur state government, which he considers inadequate and seeks to have increased. In 2009, he met President Pratibha Devisingh Patil in Manipur and requested assistance for a gas agency or petrol pump under provisions for freedom fighters, but despite correspondence with the concerned authorities, no concrete outcome materialised.

During the Second World War, Kamjong was an important historical battleground. The Japanese attempted to conquer India by establishing their Indian headquarters in Kamjong. Ringshi Keishing was a Manipuri leader under the Indian National Army in Manipur. He took a crucial role in bringing the Japanese to Manipur from Burma. He led them up to Kohima. As stated earlier, the 31<sup>st</sup> Division of the Imperial Japanese Army under the command of Lt. General Sato emerged around Kohima earlier

than expected. One column was heading for Ukhrul with Kohima as its chief objective, while the rest moved straight towards the Naga hills. The Japanese plan, as stated earlier, was to cut the main Imphal- Dimapur road. The garrison was, however, warned by some Naga hillmen, and as a result, defence positions were hastily constructed on a series of hillocks along a mile-long ridge. The first shot in the Naga hills was fired by the Assam regiment and the Assam armed police, 30 miles east of Kohima at Karasom. With every available man, including some from the administrative units, the total strength of the garrison was increased to 1000 persons who had to fight not less than 15000 Japanese men closing upon them. In the nearby Dimapur garrison, out of 45000 persons on the list of the national cardholders, only about 500 could handle rifles. He also ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> division from India to come for rescue works at Dimapur and Kohima. Major General Sato could have attacked an undefended Dimapur, which was only 30 miles away, but for reasons known to himself, he stuck to the idea of occupying Kohima only. A force of the 5<sup>th</sup> Indian Division was flown into Arakan and deployed to hold the 'Nichuguard pass', almost adjacent to Dimapur, because it was expected that it would be attacked after overrunning Kohima. Now, the Kohima-Imphal Road was controlled by the Japanese. However, it was to the fortune of the Allied forces that the Royal British Air Force had absolute air control over the region. The 5<sup>th</sup> Division was also waiting for opportunities to move on to Kohima.

Despite several casualties, the Japanese force came closer to the office of the deputy commissioner. The battle of attrition finally took place between the two groups, and there was a hand-to-hand fight or lobbing of fused grenades at each other across the tennis court in front of D. C's main office. For almost 10 days, the Japanese seizure of Kohima continued, but on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1944, a brigade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> division fought up the road to reinforce the army of the 5<sup>th</sup> division at Kohima. Two days later, on 20<sup>th</sup> April, some other men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> division came to their rescue to relieve the rest of the garrison. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May, artillery and tanks were brought from Dimapur for an all-out attack against the Japanese force. Although the British attack was countered by crossfire from hidden hilltops, many Japanese died. Along with this, tanks began to crawl up, and by May 13, the surviving enemy fell back.

In their push northwards from Ukhrul on the 27<sup>th</sup> March, the Japanese forces destroyed Karasom village, and so also was the fate of Jessamy. By the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, due to ceaseless fighting, there was a complete disruption of normal life in Kohima and the surrounding villages. The Japanese patrol from Kohima reached distant places like Sukhalo on the new Sema Road, Ghukia on the old Sema Road, Wokha on the Makokchung road, and Pedi on the Henima road. The inhabitants of these places began looking for safer places due to fear and destruction. Kohima village was destroyed by fire before the inhabitants could save their paddy or household goods. The place and its houses were torn and cratered by shells and bombs and honeycombed with trenches and bunkers. It was the centre of bitter fighting for weeks afterwards. The large village of Chedema was destroyed during the fighting, and the same fate befell the villages of Aradura and Chandmari. The eastern half of Viswema village was blasted by the British guns and gutted by fire. Chizami was bombed by Allied aircraft, and in the process, many houses were destroyed.

Since the Japanese forces had little food, rice was requisitioned in very large quantities for their daily consumption as well as for their mules. They had specific instructions to treat the local people well and to pay for all supplies they collected. They distributed large quantities of Japanese currency and well-forged Rs 10/ Indian currency notes among the villagers in return for food and labour. They also killed and ate Chickens, pigs, cattle, Mithun, and buffalo. Since the villagers fled to the jungles or the field houses low in the valley, they contracted malaria. The Japanese did not even spare the household goods. Cooking pots once used were smashed. Although both Imphal and Kohima were surrounded and put under siege for about two months by the INA-Japanese forces, their decision to travel light with limited supplies across long distances over difficult and treacherous terrain ultimately turned against them. Conversely, the allied forces organised a continuous airlift of supplies, armaments, and security personnel throughout the siege period. In the numerous battles of attrition, the Allied forces prevail due to superior air power. On the battlefields of Kohima and Imphal, about 80000 Japanese troops of the 31<sup>st</sup>, 33<sup>rd</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup> divisions and 12000 INA troops faced 15000 British, British Indian, British West African, and American troops. By June, when the siege of Imphal and Kohima was lifted, more than 3000 Japanese perished either from bullets or hunger. Further, torrential rain in June-July compounded the problems of the retreating Japanese forces.

### POTSANGBAM TOMAL SINGH

Potsangbam Tomal Singh (1903–1999) was a prominent freedom fighter from Singjamei Chingamakha Ningthoujam Leikai, Imphal, Manipur. Actively involved in the Indian freedom struggle, he was honoured with the Tamrapatra in 1972 by the Government of India for his contributions against British colonial rule. From a young age, he participated in movements concerning the welfare of Manipur and its people. He joined the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha in 1938 and played a significant role in the Second Nupi Lan (Women's War) of 1939. Notably, he helped rescue and hospitalise injured women protesters on 12 December 1939 and presided over a historic meeting of women on 13 December at Police Lane, where the resolution for Civil Disobedience was adopted for the first time in Manipur. He was also instrumental in mediating internal conflicts within the Nikhil Manipur Mahasabha during a period of leadership crisis. In 1938, he was detained for three months for writing against the imprisonment of Rani Gaidinliu. Beyond politics, he was known for his inventive skills in crafts and design. He later served as a Working Committee member of the Manipur Praja Sanmellani, founded on 7 January 1940.

In April 1944, the local people of Moirang and the surrounding villages were alerted about the war. M. Koireng Singh was one of the politically aware local leaders who backed the Japanese forces when they arrived in Moirang. He supplied food grains from his father's granary for the INA soldiers in their war against the British government. The locals also donated the food to the Japanese force's camp at Phubala. The 17<sup>th</sup> British Division could not oppose the advancing Indo-Japanese forces, and as such, they were compelled to retreat, leaving completely behind all the southern hill ranges of Manipur up to Potsangbam. On the morning of 14<sup>th</sup> April 1944, it was reported secretly that some Indo-Japanese forces had reached Tronglaobi village, Moirang. Moirang was privileged as the sacred soil of India liberated for the first time by the INA from British colonial rule. Ferocious fighting took place between the two sides for several months, between April and June 1944, until the British finally prevailed. Almost every village located between Churachandpur and Bishenpur was affected. Many villagers took shelter in and around the Loktak lake, and many even went up to Imphal, where there was already heavy congestion. P. Tomal Singh was one of the few Manipur political workers who responded to Netaji's call. During the Japanese War in Manipur in 1941-42, he went to Moirang and stayed for about four months to join the Indian National Army (INA)-led war for Indian independence. He joined the INA-led movement with him in the last week of 1944, according to his fellow INA veteran, Hemam Nilamani Singh, while he was Deputy Education Minister to the Government of Manipur at the time Moirang was captured by the INA. He was one of the 13 members of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha who secretly travelled to Moirang from Imphal and other locations. They joined forces with Moirang members and collaborated on espionage operations.

The locals' contribution to the war cannot be left out. Naki Ahmad Choudury served in the British Indian Army as a local soldier. He was admitted to the INA as a full member. He talked about the difficulty of the Japanese forces in obtaining food and local assistance. He witnessed Col. S.A. Malik's role in gaining support from the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha and the Thanga villagers. On April 14<sup>th</sup>, Manipuri New Year Day, Cheiraoba, some Moirang leaders led by M. Koireng Singh, L. Sanaba Singh, K. Kanglen, Meinam Mani Singh, and others went to Tronglaobi, a Moirang village occupied by Indo-Japanese forces. The leaders met with the Indo-Japanese forces. INA Colonel Shaukat Ali Malik fulfilled the confidence of his leader by hoisting the Indian Tricolour at Moirang Kangla on the same day. Two battalions of the INA were led by Shah Nawaz Khan. Khan reached Tiddim at the end of March to move along with Japanese forces. The INA Group, under Shoukat Ali Malik, along with the local volunteers, were active in this sector. General Yamamoto, who led a newly formed group- a combination of some units of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> Japanese divisions backed by tanks and heavy artillery moved forward to attack Imphal but was confronted by the Allied force at Shenam. From 8 to 22 April, there was heavy fighting for control of five peaks that commanded the main road. Initially, the Japanese captured a few of them but were retained by the Allies. There were, however, heavy casualties on both sides.

Yamamoto sent some troops through the rough and indirect route to attack Pallel airfield on 28<sup>th</sup> April, as they failed to break through the roadblocks. The INA's 1<sup>st</sup> Division under Md Zaman Kiyani took part in this attack. The INA force, which set up its headquarters at Chamol, was assisted by the Brigades commanded by Inayat Kiyani and Guljara Singh, respectively. Shah Nawaj Khand led brigades that were in the Chin Hills and were also introduced to join the front. In the encounter, there were 250 casualties, and the group pulled back from Parallel. During the confrontation, the inhabitants were evacuated by lorries from their villages and kept at Imphal. Villages near Pallel and Tengnoupal not only suffered from Japanese demand for paddy and the destruction of livestock, but also from the fact that these villages couldn't do any cultivation.

### **HEMAM NILAMANI SINGH**

Hemam Neelmani Singh, born in 1915, was a distinguished freedom fighter, social reformer, and former Deputy Education Minister of Manipur who played an important role in India's independence movement, particularly in the Northeast, and later in educational and linguistic reforms. Strongly influenced by the ideas of Subhas Chandra Bose, he joined the Indian National Army in 1944. He actively participated in the Battle of Imphal (1944) and was associated with the historic unfurling of the Indian tricolour at Moirang on 14 April 1944, the first time the national flag was raised on Indian soil. He remained underground until 1945, was later arrested by the British, imprisoned, and finally released in 1946. After independence, as Deputy Education Minister of Manipur, Hemam Neelmani Singh made significant contributions to education reform and women's empowerment, advocating wider access to higher education. He donated his residence at Moirang Konjengbam for use as the INA headquarters, promoted Hindi as a unifying language to strengthen national integration, and lived an austere life—restricting himself to one meal a day until the introduction of the Science stream at Moirang College.

Then the INA and the Japanese forces had been facing a lot of difficulties due to the rainy season, deteriorated condition of roads, scarcity of food, etc. Consequently, they were forced to retreat to Burma. And all Manipuris who joined the INA and worked as helpers, including M. Koireng Singh, H. Nilamani Singh, K. Gopal Singh, and L. Sanaba Singh of Moirang, were also declared traitors by the British Government. Hemam Nilamani Singh and M. Koireng Singh played important roles in shaping the social development of Manipur after independence. The house of H. Nilamani Singh became the Headquarters of the INA. On 20<sup>th</sup> July 1944, they were leaving for Rangoon. All the Indo-Japanese forces started retreating in the middle of July. After getting a retreat order from the Rangoon Headquarters, Col. Malik, Commander of the Bahadur group, was compelled to leave his headquarters at Moirang in the middle of July 1944, along with those members of the Manipur party. Many army personnel on their way to Rangoon died due to starvation. Dysentery and diarrhoea after a long journey on foot through Tiddim Road. The party reached Kalemyo, a border town of Burma. Their ration from Tiddim to Kalemyo was only maize, and only after Kalemyo, they could get rice. The party reached Sagaing. Therefore, the party from Manipur crossed the river by motorboat in small groups. Immediately after crossing the Irrawaddy, they arrived at Mandalay, and lastly, they reached headquarters at Rangoon on 16-9-1944. They, along with Col. Malik, met Netaji. H. Nilamani Singh offered Netaji a sum of Rs 3000/ which was entrusted by his father. Some of the INA soldiers faced acute malaria infection, and they were hospitalised for medical treatment at Miyang Hospital, about 10 km away from Rangoon. When the party reached Rangoon, Netaji introduced them to an assembly of the INA officers and jawans. All the members from Manipur put up in 11 guest houses at Kandogulay, Rangoon. After the surrender of Japan to the Allied forces in the middle of August 1945, the INA at Rangoon had to surrender. The members from Manipur were also arrested by the Rangoon occupying forces from their hiding places and put in Rangoon Central jail. They were brought to Calcutta by ship and released after detention and interrogation for about 48 hours. The Manipur party was sent to Manipur by rail and road at government expense and reached Manipur on May 6, 1946, with an instruction to report to the state government. Thus ended the contribution of Manipuris to the INA movement.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Indian National Army (INA) movement occupied Manipur because of a uniquely significant position within this movement, not only because it served as the eastern gateway to India but also because it became the first Indian territory where the national Tricolour was hoisted on liberated soil at Moirang Kangla on 14 April 1944. This symbolic act transformed Manipur into a powerful site of nationalist memory and resistance. The present study has highlighted the crucial yet often overlooked contributions of three Manipuri freedom fighters, i.e. Potsangbam Tomal Singh, Ringshi Keishing, and Hemam Nilamani Singh, whose dedication and sacrifices substantially strengthened the INA movement in Manipur. Their roles extended beyond battlefield participation to include mobilisation of local support, intelligence gathering, logistical assistance, and political organisation. Through their efforts, the local population of both the hill and valley regions became active participants in the national struggle, despite the risks of repression, displacement, and later persecution by colonial authorities.

The experiences of these individuals also reveal the complex realities of the INA campaign in Northeast India, marked by severe geographical challenges, scarcity of supplies, monsoon conditions, and ultimately military retreat. Yet, despite its military failure, the INA movement had a profound psychological and political impact, accelerating the decline of British authority and reshaping nationalist consciousness across India. The declaration of Manipuri INA collaborators as "traitors" by the colonial government further underscores the intensity of their commitment and the risks they endured. By revisiting these contributions through primary and secondary sources, this paper integrates Manipur's experience into the broader narrative of India's freedom struggle. It argues that the sacrifices of Manipuri freedom fighters were not peripheral but central to the nationalist movement,

deserving greater recognition in Indian historiography. Their legacy continues to inspire regional and national understandings of resistance, sacrifice, and the collective quest for independence.

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