



## Original Article

### INA MOVEMENT IN MANIPUR AND PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

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#### ABSTRACT

The Indian National Army (INA) movement constitutes an important chapter in the history of India's freedom struggle, particularly in the eastern frontier region of Manipur during the Second World War. This article examines the historical context of the rise of nationalism in Manipur, the advance of the INA into the region, and the nature of popular participation in the movement. It argues that long-term political mobilisation since the 1930s, women-led anti-colonial protests, and growing dissatisfaction with British colonial policies created a receptive environment for the INA. The study highlights the role of prominent Manipuri figures such as Mairembam Koireng Singh and Hemam Nilamani and analyses the participation of ordinary men and women who supported the movement through logistics, intelligence, and voluntary enlistment. Although the INA campaign in Manipur failed to achieve its immediate military objectives, it had a profound political and psychological impact, intensifying nationalist consciousness and integrating Manipur more firmly into the broader narrative of India's struggle for independence.

**Keywords:** Indian National Army, Manipur, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Second World War, Nationalism

#### INTRODUCTION

The emergence of nationalism in Manipur was neither sudden nor uniform; rather, it evolved gradually as a response to colonial domination, political marginalisation and socio-economic disruption during the early decades of the twentieth century (Dena, 2016). As a consequence of the Anglo-Manipur War of 1891, Manipur was brought under British paramountcy, leading to the erosion of indigenous political authority and the imposition of colonial administrative structures that fundamentally altered the region's political landscape. For several decades after this event, resistance to colonial rule remained fragmented and largely un-organised, manifesting more as sporadic expressions of discontent than as sustained political movements. However, the early 20th century witnessed the gradual emergence of political consciousness shaped by new educational opportunities, exposure to print culture, and interaction with broader anti-colonial ideas circulating in British India.

Nationalism as an idea developed in Manipur developed in the 20th century which gained momentum with the foundation of the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha in 1934. The Mahasabha provided the first organised political platform for articulating popular grievances against colonial rule and local administrative injustices. The period between 1934 and 1948 witnessed the establishment of a plethora of organisations such as Manipur Praja Mandal, Kabui Association, Kuki National Assembly, Manipur Krishak Sabha Party, Manipur Youth League, Students' Federation and Manipur Mahila Sammelani which were social, religious and political in character. These organisations varied in composition, ideology, and objectives. However, they all shared a common objective – to

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**Received:** 08 December 2025; **Accepted:** 24 January 2025; **Published** 14 February 2026

**DOI:** [10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i1.2026.6587](https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v14.i1.2026.6587)

**Page Number:** 113-116

**Journal Title:** International Journal of Research -GRANTHAALAYAH

**Journal Abbreviation:** Int. J. Res. Granthaalayah

**Online ISSN:** 2350-0530, **Print ISSN:** 2394-3629

**Publisher:** Granthaalayah Publications and Printers, India

**Conflict of Interests:** The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Authors' Contributions:** Each author made an equal contribution to the conception and design of the study. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

**Transparency:** The authors affirm that this manuscript presents an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study. All essential aspects have been included, and any deviations from the original study plan have been clearly explained. The writing process strictly adhered to established ethical standards.

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bring an end to British imperialism and the injustice meted out to the people by the colonial rulers and collectively represented an expanding social base of political mobilisation that cut across caste, gender, occupational, and ethnic lines [Kamei \(2016\)](#).

The fourth session of the the Nikhil Hindu Manipuri Mahasabha held on 29th and 30th December, 1938 at the Chinga Ground, Imphal was presided by Hijam Irabot. There he raised the slogan "Bande Manipur Mataram" which was a watershed moment in the political history of Manipur. The adoption of the slogan "Bande Manipur Mataram" symbolised the assertion of a collective political identity and the convergence of regional aspirations with all-India nationalist idioms [Dena \(1991\)](#). The demands for a full responsible government in Manipur and a single administration for the hills and the valley were also put forward. The Mahasabha became the most influential party with its democratic ideas and expanded its network among the people.

Parallel to these political developments were women-led movements that further radicalised nationalist sentiment. The resistance of Manipuri women against the colonial policy of exporting rice outside the state emerged as a significant episode in anti-colonial mobilisation. The export of rice resulted in scarcity and rising prices, aggravating economic hardship among the population. Women's collective protests against this policy not only addressed immediate economic concerns but also demonstrated the capacity of women to act as political agents, thereby broadening the social base of nationalism [Lokendra \(1993\)](#).

By the early 1940s, Manipur thus possessed a politically charged environment characterised by organised political activity, popular discontent, and heightened receptivity to militant forms of resistance. It was within this historical context that the Indian National Army (INA) movement entered Manipur during the Second World War, profoundly influencing both the political consciousness of the people and the region's place in the broader narrative of India's freedom struggle.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a historical and analytical approach based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include memoirs, diaries, archival documents, and oral testimonies preserved in regional archives and private collections. The direct contact method has been employed to collect personal narratives that supplement documentary evidence. Secondary sources consist of scholarly monographs, research articles, and historical studies relating to modern Manipur, the Second World War, and the Indian National Army. The collected data have been critically analysed and contextualised within the broader framework of colonial politics and wartime geopolitics.

## OBJECTIVES

The present study aims to examine the significance of the INA movement in Manipur with particular reference to local participation and leadership. The specific objectives are as follows-

- 1) to analyse the political and social conditions in Manipur that facilitated support for the INA movement.
- 2) to highlight the role played by prominent Manipuri personalities in the INA movement.
- 3) to examine the nature of popular participation in the INA campaign in Manipur.
- 4) to assess the impact of the INA movement on nationalist consciousness and anti-colonial mobilisation in Manipur.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### INA MOVEMENT AND ITS MARCH TOWARDS MANIPUR

The Indian National Army (INA) was formed in Singapore in 1942 under the leadership of Captain Mohan Singh, initially by recruiting Indian prisoners of war captured by the Japanese army. Its objective was to liberate India from the yoke of British imperialism. The basic structure of the INA as the military wing of the Indian Independence League was conceived at a conference convened from 28th to 30th March, 1942 at the Sanno Hotel in Tokyo chaired by Rash Behari Bose. It deliberated over the dissemination of activities of India's independence movement in Southeast Asia and India. The conference aimed to coordinate overseas Indian nationalist activities and to integrate military action with the broader goal of independence [Sarkar \(1989\)](#).

Subash Chandra Bose took reins of the INA in 1943 after his arrival in Singapore. He also won the support and assurance of Hideki Tojo, the Prime Minister of Japan and introduced some changes in the activities and administration of the organisation. The number of soldiers who volunteered for the INA swelled up soon as he assumed the organisation's leadership. Recruitment to it was also opened to civilians who were given training mostly in Malay. He designated the brigades of the INA after Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maulana Azad, himself and Jhansi Rani Lakshmibai, which was an all-women regiment. The formation of the all-women Jhansi Rani Regiment marked a radical departure from conventional military practice and symbolised the inclusive nature of the anti-colonial struggle [Shanti Devi \(2002\)](#).

A special operations unit called the Bahadur Group was formed within the INA and tasked with frontline intelligence and to operate behind enemy lines. Bose deliberately declined to be assigned a rank in the army and therefore soldiers of the INA and civilians addressed to him as Netaji ("Dear Leader") thereby reinforcing his role as a political leader guiding a national liberation movement rather than a conventional military commander.

The INA fought alongside the Japanese army against the British in World War II. The British were gradually forced to retreat from Burma northwards toward Manipur in the direction of India. This served to be a great opportunity for the INA as there was a prospect of entering British India's territory. Netaji then shifted the Provisional Government of Free India to Rangoon, the capital of Burma, from where the INA made the first shot of India's independence when it launched a campaign code named Ha-Go with the Japanese forces on the Arakan Front on 4th February, 1944. The Gandhi Regiment of 2800 men, commanded by Zulmara Singh, fought in Arakan.

## INA IN MANIPUR

Manipur became a crucial theatre of military operations during the Indo-Japanese offensive of 1944. The INA forces fought with valour and courage despite the severe lack of armaments and air support. Netaji had a firm belief that the control of Imphal would lead to anti-British revolts in eastern India. In March, 1944, the Indo-Japanese forces crossed the Indian frontier from the Kennedy Peak. They were confronted by the British army at three strategic points- Bishenpur, Sangshak and Pallel. The invading forces captured Pallel and Tamu, which temporarily disrupted British defensive positions [Lokendra \(1993\)](#).

A group headed by Koireng welcomed the Indo-Japanese forces at Tronglaobi, Moirang. He extended full cooperation and accompanied the Bahadur Group of INA to Moirang. Colonel Malik of the Bahadur Group hoisted the springing tiger embossed tri-colour flag on 14th April at Moirang, where the INA Memorial Complex stands today. This symbolised a momentary assertion of sovereignty [Dena \(2016\)](#). The Provisional Government of Free India put Moirang under its control.

However, the initial momentum of the campaign soon encountered severe challenges. On 29th April, 1944, the Japanese (Yamamoto Detachment) and the INA forces decided to attack the Pallel airfield simultaneously from western and southern sides respectively. The attack failed and proved to be a great setback. The INA and the Japanese forces based at Moirang were fighting hard against the British in and around Bishenpur. The British could reinforce their troops by rail and road up to Kohima and Assam while the Indo-Japanese were finding it hard to do the same as monsoon had set in and converted Kabaw Valley, their main channel of communication to the rear, into a veritable sea of mud making the movement of wheeled traffic and supplies almost impossible. The Japanese had thought Imphal would fall in their hands by the middle of April. Not only their plan failed, their supply position also became precarious as the days passed. As shortages of food, ammunition, and medical supplies intensified, the prospect of capturing Imphal receded, ultimately forcing the Indo-Japanese forces to retreat.

## INA MOVEMENT AND PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION

The INA movement in Manipur was characterised by active participation from diverse sections of society. Among the Manipuris, Mairembam Koireng Singh, who went on to become the first Chief Minister of Manipur, and his team had gone to Burma to meet Netaji in 1944. There they were received by the Indo-Japanese Advanced Party (Intelligence group of the INA). Hemam Nilamani of Moirang also joined the INA and his residence became the headquarters of the INA in Manipur. The British Political Agent declared him a traitor and so he fled to Rangoon where he contributed 3000 rupees as war fund to Netaji [Dena \(1991\)](#).

The INA also distributed pamphlets to the people of Manipur seeking their support in the war against British imperialism. Some pamphlets were also brought to Thokchom Angou Singh of Singjamei who was the vice-president of the Praja Sammelani. He explained the message from Netaji and appealed to the people to extend their support to the Indo-Japanese forces. The appeal was welcomed by the people especially the leaders and workers of the Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha who had identical ideas and objectives. 13 members of the Mahasabha reached Moirang secretly, joined the INA and worked together with the people living there. They collected a large quantity of ration and carried out espionage activities. The part of Manipur south of Ningthoukhong was liberated from the British rule and brought under the control of the Provincial Government of Free India for three months till 15th July, 1944. Under these circumstances, the then Political Agent of Manipur blacklisted the 13 members of the Mahasabha and ordered the killing of some leaders like Koireng, Nilamani, Sanaba, etc.

Women's participation was particularly noteworthy. Mention may be made of a few women like M. Randhoni Devi and O. Keina Devi who volunteered to be enlisted in the INA and joined the Jhansi Rani Regiment [Shanti Devi \(2002\)](#). Ordinary villagers also showed their support to the INA by giving food supplies, carrying out espionage activities and in casualty evacuation. Such participation demonstrated that the INA movement in Manipur was not merely a military episode but a broader socio-political mobilisation rooted in popular support.

The battle between the Japanese and the British at the Maibam Lokpa Ching (Red Hill) was the last losing ground of Japanese army and retreated from Manipur without reaching Imphal. The Manipuris' participation in the INA movement, thus, ended with the retreat of the Indo-Japanese forces. Eventually, Koireng and Nilamani were captured by the British government and imprisoned in Calcutta and Rangoon respectively

## CONCLUSION

Manipur became to be an important battlefield of the Second World War which displaced large number of people and brought normal life in the state to a standstill. Economy was worst hit, agricultural activities had to be abandoned and scarcity became widespread. Despite the failure to fulfil its military objective, the INA movement aroused political consciousness and nationalism among the people of Manipur to greater heights. The symbolic liberation of Moirang and the hoisting of the INA flag remain enduring reminders of Manipur's role in India's struggle for independence. The movement also brought about healthier relations between the leaders of Manipur and those of India. It would not be presumptuous to posit the foundation of the INA and its course of actions immensely contributed to and hastened the attainment of India's independence.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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