

Netaji's Jhansi 'warrior' looks back

Eighty-three-year-old Indian National Army (INA) veteran Capt Janaky Devar has only one wish - that her leader Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's sacrifices are given due recognition by his country.

Today a distinguished Malaysia-based NRI, she said, 'I live on in the memory of having responded to the call of a great leader so absorbed in the cause of freedom for India. A leader who had no identity apart from this dedication.'

It is one of the lesser-known facts of the INA or Azad Hind Fauj - the force raised by Bose - that it comprised equally of Indian prisoners of war and Indian emigrants living in Southeast Asia. The majority of the volunteers were Indians living in the region. Devar's family lived in Malaya as it was then known, and she was among the early women volunteers in the INA.

She fought for the freedom of a motherland she had never seen and later for Malaysian independence in the land of her birth. In 1946, she became one of the co-founders of the Malaysian Indian Congress. Later she became a senator in the Malaysian parliament.

The INA veteran, who lives in Kuala Lumpur, was on a visit to [New Delhi](#) to attend a function organised by the Netaji Subhas Bose - INA Trust for INA veterans. The meeting, which was attended by a number of INA veterans and eminent citizens of Delhi, passed a resolution calling for a befitting INA memorial and Netaji Subhas Bhawan to be built in the heart of the capital to honour those heroes of the independence movement.

It is an issue close to the hearts of those who had served under the charismatic leader and several veterans have criticised successive Indian governments for not taking any action to set up a memorial.

Devar was barely 17 years old when she first saw Netaji Bose; it was in 1943 that he came to Malaya and addressed a huge gathering in the Selangor Club maidan, where he appealed for donations and volunteers for the INA. His magnetic personality and stirring words moved her so deeply that she spontaneously took off her diamond earrings and gold chain to donate for the Azad Hind Fauj. She was the first Indian woman to do so and her example set the trend for donating jewellery. It was the next morning when her photograph appeared in the newspapers that her parents came to know what she had done. Devar belonged to a prosperous family and her father was strongly opposed to her joining the INA for an uncertain future, but he finally relented.

'Janaky was my commander. We were 17 and 16 years old; we lied that we were 18 years of age to be accepted in the INA,' chuckled silver-haired Lt M.B. Mehta. The 82-year-old veteran, who prefers to introduce herself with her initials, was born in Burma (now Myanmar) but now lives in Delhi.

Six months of intensive arms training in Singapore shaped them into readiness for the onward march to the battlefield on the India-Burma border. Devar was chosen to command the contingent of women soldiers from the Malayan rubber estates, who were uneducated young women and could speak only plantation Tamil. It was her task to mould those village girls with their newly cropped hair into soldiers of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Devar rose to become the second-in-command of the regiment.

Devar recalled how Netaji Bose had instructed the regiment to break into groups of 150 to move out of Rangoon (now Yangon) when the INA was retreating. The second group that Devar was leading had a rough retreat, their train was bombed and the women had to walk to Bangkok - it took 26 days of night marches braving bombs and machine guns firing at them. After the retreat across Myanmar, Devar had the responsibility of ensuring that the women from Malaysia returned safely to their homes. 'I reported to Netaji Aug 12, 1945, at Singapore, and he asked me 'Janaky Devar, what took you so long to reach here?' and he placed his hand on her head in a gesture of blessing, affection and kinship.

'I never saw him again. A week later, I heard that he had died in a plane crash,' she said with a catch in her voice.

After the Rani of Jhansi Regiment was disbanded and the soldiers returned to their homes across Southast Asia, Devar's indomitable spirit led her to active participation in the battle for Malaysian independence. She was one of the first women to be involved in the fight for Malaysian independence. She joined the Malaysian Indian Congress Medical Mission and toured the rubber estates throughout Malaya as part of the medical mission's activities. She met and talked to the poor Indian emigrant workers, descendants of the indentured workers brought from southern India to work on the plantations. She got a first hand view of the conditions under which the estate workers lived and worked, this experience led her to realise the crying need for political organisation to ensure the welfare of Indian immigrants.

Devar had been a teacher but after marriage to Athi Nahappan, the young couple moved to London, where she worked at two jobs - including a night job as a cook - to put her husband through law school. Both of them returned to Kuala Lumpur to actively participate in Malaysian politics - Nahappan became a minister in the government and Devar a senator. But for Capt Janaky Devar, the INA days were the most stirring period of her life and she has one wish - to see her leader honoured in his land.

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