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# A Man Extraordinary Who Coined 'Jai Hind' | M.R. Narayan Swamy

BOOK REVIEW

Sunday 28 May 2023, by M.R. Narayan Swamy

#socialtags

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Abid Hasan Safrani: Netaji's Comrade-in-Arms**

**Compiled by: Ismat Mehdi and Shehbaz Safrani**

Orient BlackSwan

Pages: xxv + 148; Price: Rs 895.

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He was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's sole Indian companion on his perilous 90-day submarine voyage from Europe to Asia in 1943. He was also the inventor of the INA's – and subsequently free India's – patriotic slogan: Jai Hind! If the Japanese had found a third seat for Netaji on what turned out to be his final air flight, it is possible he too may have been on that airplane. Meet Abid Hasan Safrani, a man of immense talent and inner strength who suffered by plunging into India's freedom movement, sparkled as a diplomat after 1947, and lived a quiet life following retirement until dying peacefully in May 1984.

Abid's political life, like with so many others, began with an attraction to Mahatma Gandhi. He lived in the Sabarmati ashram, dutifully cleaning toilets and doing sundry menial tasks, which shaped his sense of patriotism and humility. He later joined the Navjivan Trust which promoted Gandhian thought but was arrested for planning to raid the Nasik distillery in support of the anti-liquor movement. He was charged with sedition and given six months' rigorous imprisonment.

Abid went to Berlin to pursue engineering in 1935 because his mother, a patriot, did not want her son to go to England to study. He remained there after WWII began, joining German Radio as a translator to finance himself. In Berlin, Abid met Bose, whose call to join the freedom struggle was so strong that he gave up his studies and joined Netaji as his personal secretary and interpreter. His family had no clue about his activities.

Hitler told Bose that he would not allow him to fly to Japan as the flight path would be over enemy territory. "I have many enemies. If there was a mishap, they would say I killed you." It was then decided that Bose would take a submarine to join the Japanese. The only man Bose chose as his companion was Abid.

They set out on February 8, 1943. It took two long months to travel from Germany to a point off Madagascar. From Keil, the submarine went through Danish waters, the Norwegian coast, the North Sea and around the north of Scotland before moving down the Atlantic. It was a very tough journey. According to Abid, everyone sat up all 24 hours – for two months! There was no elbow room. Everything, the food included, smelt of diesel. At one point, the submarine almost came under attack. There was panic. But Netaji, who was then giving a dictation to Abid, continued as if nothing had happened. After the miraculous escape, the German captain announced over a loudspeaker that when everyone was shaken up, "the Indian leader and his secretary were cool and composed".

During the entire submarine journey, which took one more month to complete after his transfer into Japanese hands, Netaji was revising his book, *Indian Struggle*. Unlike in the German submarine, food was no problem in the Japanese one. Netaji's subsequent discussions with the Japanese, his transfer to Singapore, the birth of the Indian National Army (INA), its march towards India and subsequent military defeat are well known.

Abid comes out with some remarkable traits of Netaji, who he describes as "a terrible person to work for, disciplined and impatient". He would pull up Abid whenever he spotted a mistake. "It was terrible working for him. Once he did not sleep for two days and nights and did not allow me to sleep either; he kept busy all the time." In the INA, Bose wore the clothes the soldiers wore and ate the food the soldiers ate. "He worked more than anyone I knew. He hardly retired for the night before two o'clock in the morning and there is no instance to my knowledge when at sunrise he was found in bed."

Col Habibur Rahman, who was with Netaji in the flight which crashed but survived, said that while being rushed to a hospital, Bose muttered: "Hasan... Hasan, where is Hasan?" Col Rahman replied: "Hasan is not here Sir, I am Habibur Rahman." Abid laments that all the inquiries into Netaji's death had their terms limited to ascertain if Bose was dead or alive. They never addressed the most important question: was the death an accident or sabotage?

After the fall of INA, Abid was arrested and languished in a Singapore jail. When Jawaharlal Nehru visited the prison to meet INA prisoners, he found Abid coiled up in a solitary cell, all skin and bone. After release, he fell seriously ill but recovered. He tried to work for the Congress party but soon got disillusioned. On the strength of his mastery over German and Farsi (Persian), Abid joined the Indian foreign service. He served with distinction in Egypt (where he met British spy Kim Philby), China, Switzerland, Iraq, Syria, Senegal and Denmark.

A lifelong bachelor, Abid settled down in Golconda after retirement and grew flowers and fruits on a farm. He would himself carry them to the market. He got a small pension and periodically received some money from the Freedom Fighters' Fund. Despite his extraordinary involvement in the freedom struggle, he rarely spoke about it and did not seek publicity. He also generously gave away money to relatives. In later years, he was troubled by growing corruption in the country.

The suffix 'Safrani' adopted by Abid was derived from the word for saffron, a colour associated with sacrifice in the Indian subcontinent. He knew Sanskrit *shlokas* devoted to the goddess of learning and protection. He would say that the fount of Indian spiritual thinking was in the *Gita*.

As for Netaji, he divorced religion completely from nationalism. Although a deeply religious man, Bose would not permit public display of any religious practice. In that sense, he was far-sighted. Despite being a Bengali, Netaji was all for simple Hindustani – a cocktail of Hindi and Urdu – as opposed to the Sanskritized Hindi the Hindu right loves.

This is lovely and moving book. Compiled by a niece and a nephew of Abid, it is based on his notebooks retained by the family and anecdotal memories recounted by family and friends. There is also a lengthy extract from an interview of Abid carried by the *Mainstream*. The book is a fitting tribute to an unsung Indian hero.

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