

BOOK REVIEW

The War Diary of Asha-san: From Tokyo to Netaji's Indian National Army

**Lt. Bharati “Asha” Sahay Choudhry (Author), Tanvi Srivastava
(Translator), India, HarperCollins, October 28, 2022***

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This book is composed and arranged in an interesting manner. It becomes evident while looking at the “Contents” page that the Diary of Lt. Bharati “Asha” Sahay Choudhury follows the section called “The Setting” in three parts. The translator’s notes on the text, which usually come before the translation are placed after the main text itself, in a separate segment that contains sections entitled Character Sketches, Songs, Notes, Bibliography, as well as “Proclamation of the Provisional Government of Azad India.” This way of arranging the content signals the novelty of the text right from the beginning.

The section named “The Setting” begins with the experience of Anand Mohan Sahay, who was the father of Asha Sahay. Anand Mohan Sahay, originally a student of Patna’s Temple medical school, gave up his studies and dedicated his life to the Independence Movement after he was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, who at that time was preparing to unleash the Non-violence movement across India. While the Movement raged all over India in the form of peaceful protests and boycotts, the violence that took place in Chauri Chaura of Bihar in February 1922 made Gandhi halt and call off the movement, which was a pivotal point in leaving the youth and the entire Independence movement temporarily directionless. Anand Mohan Sahay met Sati Sen at the 37th annual session of the Indian National Congress in Bihar in 1922, but left for Japan in 1923 and then returned in 1927 to marry Sati Sen who was also a patriot like him, as well as one of the early students of Visva-Bharati in Shantiniketan founded by Rabindranath Tagore. His wife traveled back to Japan with him, and Asha Sahay was born in 1928, followed by four more siblings in quick succession over the next decade. The Sahay spouses worked with renowned Independence Movement workers like Rash Behari Bose, and Raja Mahendra Pratap. They were supporters of the Indian National Congress for a long time, and they sided with Subhas Chandra Bose when the historic rift between the Indian National Congress took place in 1939. The portion

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named “The Setting” ends with the mention of Asha Sahay meeting Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose for the first time in 1943 when she was fifteen years old. Asha’s diary has a note about it. She begins by expressing how they had heard about Netaji as the ideal hero whom India and India’s Independence Struggle needed. Asha’s father Anand Mohan Sahay was absent from home while working with Netaji and they grew up under the strict supervision of their mother Sati Sahay and the genial benevolence of their uncle. Since Asha had grown up in Japan, she was well-versed in Japanese culture, customs, and the Japanese language from a young age. Her diaries were written in Japanese. However, her passion to fight for her motherland was bright in her mind and when she met Netaji for the first time, she and her sister both volunteered for the Rani of Jhansi regiment which was created by Netaji. Netaji allowed Asha to enlist in it while telling her sister to wait a few more years.

The time when Asha met Netaji was a crucial and turbulent time for the world at large. The Second World War was raging across nations and Japanese cities were constantly being bombed. Asha’s writing gives us a glimpse of the war-torn condition of Tokyo and the reception of Netaji in Tokyo. She writes that the Japanese and Bengali people living in Japan hailed Netaji as a hero and the prime minister of Japan, Tojo, also promised to extend help to Netaji’s cause.

When Asha left her home to join Netaji while wearing her INA (Indian National Army) uniform, her neighbors, friends, and family came to see her off. While talking about bidding goodbye to her mother, she remembered the time when they had been separated from their mother because she went to India carrying a secret verbal message to Netaji in Calcutta. She writes in detail about this mission and her mother’s fearless conduct. When Asha and her father boarded the train, she realized that she was free to sing any patriotic song she wanted, whether it was Japanese, Hindustani, or Bengali. The first part of her diary ends here as they reach Kobe and check into the Oriental Hotel, while she thinks about a poem in Japanese she composed on the train.

The second part of her diary starts with a record of some of the letters she sent to her mother and her siblings upon reaching Kobe. These letters show her impression of a bomb-devastated Kobe. Asha was born and spent a part of her childhood in one of the villages in Kobe and she visited that place with her father. After that, she visits Taipei where her father teaches her Hindi and English which she finds to be very hard to learn. She speaks again and again about dedicating and sacrificing her life for her country, and she is self-aware that her Japanese education has a great role in this, as Japanese education is deeply concerned with patriotism and nationalism. She tries to gather up her fortitude by thinking “I am a soldier of Netaji. I must obey his commands. It is forbidden to ask the reason behind any of his orders.” While staying there, she and her father have a close call with a machine gun bullet that burst into their room. She also meets an elite Kamikaze Special Attack Unit. She states that she revered them and thought of them as almost divine beings. She witnessed the ritual of sending them off and interacted with their captain. They sacrificed themselves the next day in a Kamikaze attack upon the enemy, but this interaction left a deep impression on Asha’s mind and made her feel more resolute about her duty. Whenever she visits a temple, she prays for the victory of the selfless heroes fighting for freedom within the country or abroad.

After a certain period, she began her training to be an active soldier of the INA and a freedom fighter in Bangkok. In a diary entry dated 1945, she writes that Burma was being dominated by the British and the soldiers of the INA were suffering atrocities for their resistance. Netaji’s speech about it on the radio is also recorded within the diary entry. She also relates witnessing how the INA was facing internal doubts. Men and soldiers were asking Netaji about their futures and families which she then deemed to be cowardly. Netaji asks her to stay with the family of Panditji and she reflects in hindsight that this was her last encounter with Netaji, which she did not know

then. However, before she could move to Pandit Raghunath Sharma's house, the regiment was imprisoned at the camp and their rifles were confiscated. After she moves into Panditji's house she painstakingly learns Hindi and typing to pass her days while hearing different kinds of rumors about ceasefires and the resumption of war.

On August 8, 1945, Asha learns about the atomic bomb attack on Japan which stuns her in its horrendousness. A week later on August 15, Japan's surrender is announced through Radio Tokyo and her short diary entry poignantly captures the aftermath of the surrender in the minds of the common Japanese people. A few days later she hears of the death of Netaji, but she considers it to be a rumor and courageously goes through her days until she is reunited with her father in 1946. She learns about the experiences of her father and her uncle Satyadev Sashay. They received permission to return to India and they reached Calcutta on June 23, 1946. She is later reunited with her mother who tells her in detail about her experiences after Netaji's death. Sati Sashay was part of the small group of people who took Netaji's ashes to the Renkoji Temple. The memoir of Asha Sahay ends in an independent India where she is reunited with her mother and her siblings, from whom she was estranged for a long time.

The main memoir is then followed by portions like the translator's note and the character sketches. The character sketches are small biographical notes provided on the members of the Sahay family and key figures of the INA. The translator's note on the other hand portrays the various decisions that she took while undertaking the task. She is in fact a close relative of Asha Sahay, and is the wife of the grandson of Asha Sahay.

She writes that the original diary which was written in Japanese was the best version, but a Hindu translation of the Japanese text done by Asha Sahay herself survived and this English translation was mostly based on that version. She also states that some of the dates recorded in the diary are a bit inconsistent but does her best to try to supplement it with the benefit of hindsight. The book ends with a proclamation of the Provisional Government of "Azad Hind." Since this is a diary text which relies heavily on the function of memory, it leaves a lot of room for exploration and further research into the genre, while becoming an important record of the events that took place at that time. The personal reflections and observations of Asha Sahay are translated in a way that is easy to read, yet it is a moving account of a young teenage girl's journey from faraway Japan to India while holding her dedication to her mother country close to her heart.