

BOOK EXCERPT

Abid Hasan Safrani: Meet Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's comrade, who coined the slogan 'Jai Hind'

An excerpt from 'Abid Hasan Safrani: Netaji's Comrade-in-Arms,' by Ismat Mehdi and Shehbaz Safrani.

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Abid Hasan Safrani (L) and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose.

It was a cold wintry day at the Indian League training camp near Berlin. Abid Hasan had just finished his morning exercises when he was asked to report to the Regimental Commander's Office. Instructions given were short and crisp.

“Mr Bose wants to see you immediately at his Berlin Office. You better go just now by the first train possible. And hand over your arms to the Quartermaster.” A little surprised at being asked to hand over his arms, Hasan did as he was told and caught the first available train to Berlin.

After a few days wait, Abid Hasan was asked to pack up and go to the railway station of Lehrer Bahnhof in Berlin with bag and baggage, and await further instructions. On reaching the station, he saw that Netaji was already there with some top brass of the Indian League and a couple of senior German officers. His bag indicated that he too was travelling. They were waiting on the platform of the train to Kiel. Suddenly, he recalled the short talk about going east by submarine

as suggested by Hitler. So, it was actually happening. On the train Netaji asked him, “Now do you know where you are going?”

“Yes, Sir! I know where we are going. We are both going to perform Haj!” They both burst out laughing. It was the February 8, 1943, when they set sail.

The tale of their arduous and dangerous journey from Kiel to Sumatra is best described in Abid Hasan’s interview with Madan Gopal that was published in the *Mainstream Magazine* on July 26, 1997. The relevant extracts are being reproduced below with the kind permission of the *Mainstream Magazine*.

Abid Hasan: We had romantic notions about the journey in a submarine. When we boarded it we found that the U-Boat had space enough for only one bed. It was a small room where the entire crew, the doctors and us all sat together. We sat up all 24 hours. And we sat there motionless. There was no elbow room at all. We felt cramped. The moment we got up, we found ourselves in the way of somebody or the other. It was like solitary confinement. Even in jail the living conditions would be better. Such then was our life, and I felt concerned about Netaji’s health. He had been losing weight. I asked the doctor, and he made Netaji take some exercise.

As soon as we entered the submarine, we smelt diesel all over. It looked as if the blankets supplied to us had been soaked in diesel. And when we sat down to eat, we felt that there was diesel in our food also. In fact, we were so impregnated with the smell of diesel, which we would like not to eat. One day Netaji asked what was there to eat. It could either be beef or ham. We had to eat whatever was there. I told him the question what it was did not arise. Then I met the cook and looked into the pantry. As chance would have it, there was a bag of rice. And there was a small supply of lentils also. I made khichri for Netaji. He was happy and started offering it to the officers of the U-Boat. Although in the beginning they did not relish it, later they also liked it. I was apprehensive lest the quantity of rice should get consumed fast. Thank God, it continued till the end of the journey by the German submarine.

It took us two months to travel from Germany to a point off the coast of Madagascar. This was the longest lap of our journey.

Madan Gopal: Was the journey eventful?

Abid Hasan: We had to cross the North Sea. This was the only way to get to the Atlantic Ocean. British submarines were systematically firing depth charges, and north of Scotland, we had an encounter, but we scraped through. Then, near the coast of South Africa also, we encountered a tanker and our submarine torpedoed it.

Madan Gopal: Was it the SS Hermes?

Abid Hasan: I don’t remember the name. However, the tanker sank. There was an encounter with yet another tanker. This experience was very frightening. You know about the hierarchy of a

submarine. In the army you give awards for the bravery of individuals. In case of a submarine, the award is given to the boat. It is a collective effort. So, if five crosses are given, the captain of the boat takes one, the torpedo man takes another, the diesel master takes the third and the person at the wheel takes the fourth. The fifth is at the discretion of the Captain. Each one is a specialist in the work.

Incidentally, it was not necessary for Henry Ford to have been a good driver. One may or may not be educated, but each one specialises in one branch. Now the engineer of our submarine had not handled the steering wheel. Once he came and mishandled it. The boat surfaced before it could fire the depth charge. The tanker fellows spotted it and turned round on the submarine. The captain of our submarine was shouting at the top of his voice “Dive! Dive!” And he was rebuking people for mishandling it. We all heard it. The railing of our boat touched its bottom.

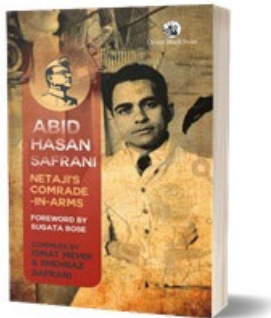
Netaji, who was giving me dictation, continued with his dictation. While the faces of all members of the crew were tense and panicky, here was Netaji continuing to give dictation. At one point he said: “Hasan, I am repeating it for the third time, and you are not taking it down. You are not attentive.” I was certainly nervous.

It was a miraculous escape for us. When the event was over, we heard over the loudspeaker the captain of the ship telling the crew that they were all Germans and proud of the fact. However, they must learn a lesson from the Indian leader and his secretary who were cool and composed, so I was also included. The mishap took place four or five days before we got to the predetermined point of the coast of Madagascar.

During the three months that we were in the submarine, Netaji was revising his “Indian Struggle.” He was also drafting memoranda on various subjects. I had to type three to four hours a day. There was terrific pressure on me. The most important work was the preparation for a meeting with [the Japanese Prime Minister] Hideki Tojo. What would we talk to him, and how? What were the problems to be discussed with him?

Netaji would think aloud. He asked me to imagine I was Tojo and then put questions to him, or he would take the role of Tojo and asked me to reply as Subhas Chandra Bose. He used to go into great details and examine all possible points that might arise. He had gone through all the possible questions one could think of, including, for instance the future of Indians in South Africa. The future of the Andamans was also discussed. We must take them. All these issues were thought of and discussed thoroughly not only in the submarine but possibly earlier also, even in Germany. If a particular question is raised, what should be the correct reply?

Netaji used to dictate, and I used to type it out. He was meticulous and pointed out mistakes even of punctuations. I had to type them again, and then again. And finally, after all this had been gone through, he would tear off all the sheets. He had in the process stored all the information in his mind. The rehearsal was so thorough that I could have answered all the questions.



Excerpted with permission from Abid Hasan Safrani: Netaji's Comrade-in-Arms, Ismat Mehdi and Shehbaz Safrani, Orient Black Swan.