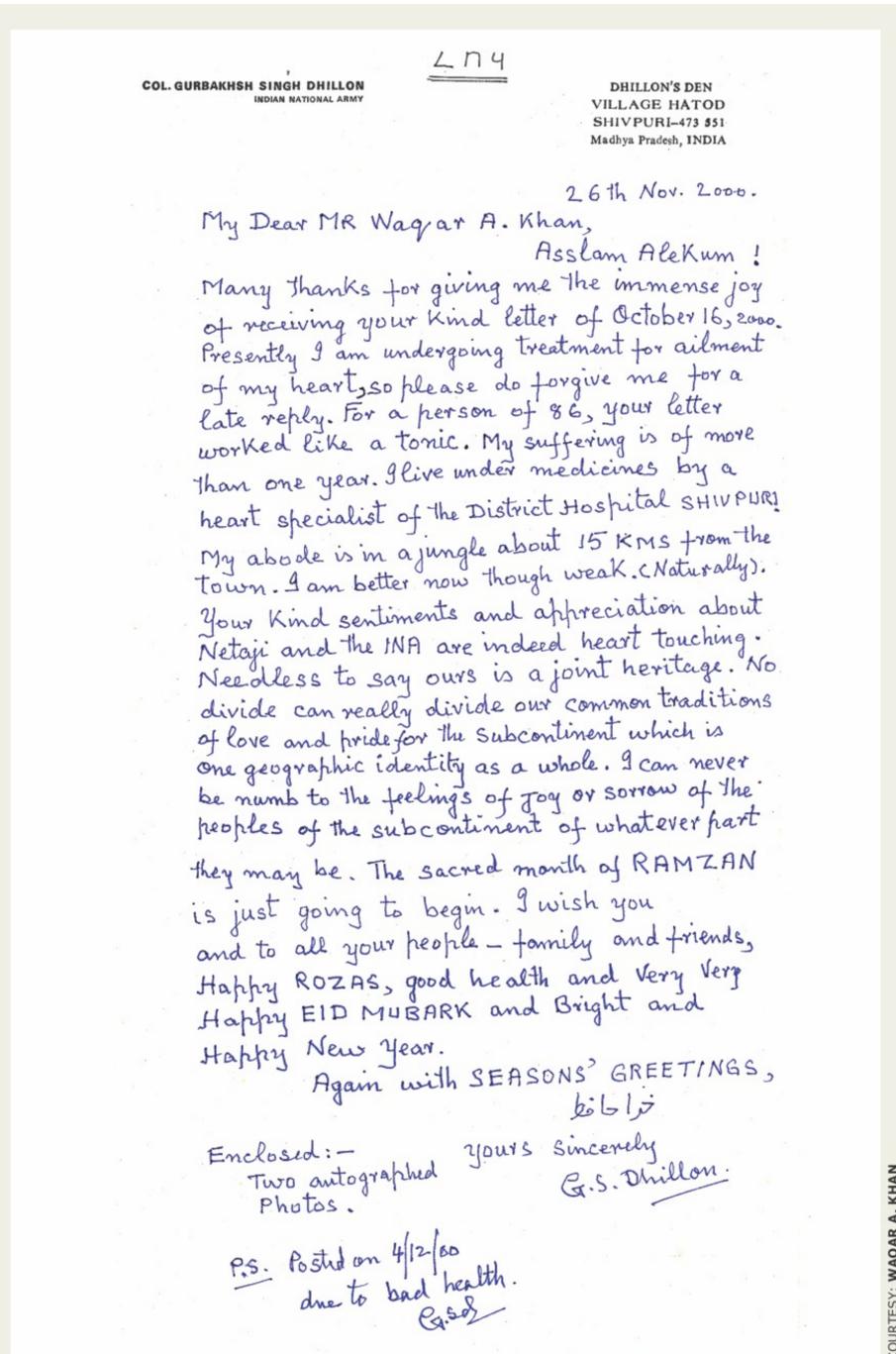


A letter from THE TIGER'S DEN

WAQAR A. KHAN

The advent of the holy month of Ramadan, ever since the year 2000 CE, reminds me of an idealistic soul, a gallant freedom fighter against British colonial rule in India, who so graciously replied to my letter, that too, from an unknown. He had endearingly addressed it, replete with that indomitable spirit, all the while in poor health and at the ripe old age of 86. I am speaking of late Colonel Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon (1914-2006) of the Indian National Army (INA), a trusted comrade of our legendary hero Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945?) who hailed from Bengal, then a part of British India.



I have held on to this precious memento, Col. Dhillon's letter, so dear to my heart, in the hope that one day I shall publish it in one of my forthcoming books. I have now changed my mind.

Advancing years and an uncertain world made me feel like publishing it right away, so that more people may have a chance to read the noble sentiments expressed in the letter, which is actually addressed to all the people of our subcontinent: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

I have reproduced Col. Dhillon's letter in its entirety, which is self-explanatory. However, I shall request our younger generations reading it, to note in its content the beauty of the secular and liberal ethos once espoused, that is, the reflection of composite culture, respect for others' religion, open-mindedness, sagacity, pride, patriotism and above all, love of humanity. Sadly, it is precisely such an eclectic mindset that we lost to the tragic partition of India in 1947.

In September 2000, I had read with great interest Col. Dhillon's autobiography, "From my Bones", published in 1998, in which he recorded his experiences of Netaji, the Indian National Army (INA) and the Red Fort trials. Subsequently, I wrote to him in October 2000, unsure of a reply. I was overjoyed when an affectionate reply finally came in late November 2000. I recall that while reading it, I was overcome with emotion.

This article will be incomplete without a brief on Netaji Subhas Bose and the INA. Netaji was one of India's greatest freedom fighters against British colonial rule. A firebrand, charismatic, radical nationalist politician and revolutionary leader, he fled India, contacted the Axis powers during WWII, and took command of the INA in 1943, which was raised by soldiers of the British Indian army who had surrendered to the Imperial Japanese Army as prisoners of war with the fall of Malaya and Singapore. Thousands of patriotic volunteers from the Indian population of Malaya and Burma were also recruited. The INA saw action in Burma along with the Japanese forces against the British and its allies in order to free India from British rule. However, the INA finally suffered defeat and surrendered at the end of the war to the

British and allied forces. Netaji Subhas Bose is alleged to have perished in a mysterious plane crash on his way to the Soviet Union in 1945 to garner support from the Soviets for his cause. Subsequently, British India gained its freedom from colonial rule, as two separate independent states of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Netaji Subhas Bose is held in great esteem in my family, and of course, throughout Bengal on both sides of the divide. In today's West Bengal he remains an iconic figure. His enviable, deified status is evident on a visit to Kolkata. He is the pride of Bengal and that of India at large.

The INA trials received unprecedented media coverage and public support in India. It galvanised an entire nation. The defendants became the symbol of the ongoing struggle for Indian independence.

Now a word on late Col. Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon. He was an officer in the INA, who, after his surrender in 1945, was charged along with his INA comrades, Maj. Gen. Shah Nawaz Khan and Col. Prem Kumar Saghal for "waging war against the King Emperor." They were tried in a military court at the end of WWII in the infamous INA trials held at the historic Red Fort in Delhi.

In his lifetime, Dhillon's exposure to different religions made him a secular and broad-minded man. He spoke Persian, Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi

and English. Dhillon met Netaji Subhas Bose in 1944 in Rangoon, Burma. He served him faithfully and worshipped him till the end of his life.

News of the INA trials in 1946 was made public through the press and All India Radio. It aroused strong emotions throughout British India. Mass demonstrations outside the Red Fort in Delhi took place where the trials were held. Indian protestors from all walks of life shouted slogans in unison against the unjust trials outside the fort and kept a constant vigil. During the INA trials, the following clarion call, vociferously reverberated all the way from Delhi to Lahore and from Calcutta to Karachi:

*"Lal Qile se aaye awaz,
 Saghal Dhillon Shah Nawaz,
 Teenon ki ho umar daraz"
 [Saghal, Dhillon, Shah Nawaz,
 comes the voice from the Red Fort,
 may the trio live long]*

The INA trials received unprecedented media coverage and public support in India. It galvanised an entire nation. The defendants became the symbol of the ongoing struggle for Indian independence. All the three accused in the trial were found guilty of waging war against the King Emperor, and the court was bound to sentence the accused either to death or transportation for life. However, the trial and the ensuing verdict led to a series of mutinies by Indian personnel of the Royal Indian Navy and Air Force including stirrings of discontent in the Indian Army. Considering the volatile circumstances the sentences were remitted by the British government and all three accused were freed unconditionally to the great jubilation of the Indian people. On his release, Dhillon worked actively towards the emergence of independent India.

During the last days of his life, Col. Dhillon was living in "Dhillon's Den" in the village of Hatod in the Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh, India. He was awarded the "Padma Bhushan"—one of the highest civilian awards of the Indian Republic—by the Indian government in 1998. He died in 2006, and was cremated with full military honours at the Azad Hind Park in Shivpuri.

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