The Thai-Bharat Cultural Legacy

Mains: *GS Paper I | Indian Heritage and Culture, History*

Why in News?

June 15, 2026, marks the 84th anniversary of the historic Bangkok Conference (1942), a critical milestone that led to the formal establishment of the Indian National Army (INA).

What is the Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge (TBCL)?

- **Tagore's Inspiration (1927) -** Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore visited Siam (now Thailand) and met with ***King Prajadhipok (Rama VII),*** highlighting deep historical ties.
- **Arrival of Prafulla Kumar Sen (1932) -** Inspired by this civilizational vision, the Bengali scholar, later known as Swami Satyananda Puri arrived in Bangkok.
- **Core Mission –** Sen’s goal was to revive and foster enduring cultural links rooted in Buddhism, philosophy, and shared epics like the Ramayana (Ramakien).
- **Institutional Setup -** Swami Satyananda Puri established the ***Dharam Ashram in 1939***, which was transformed into the Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge (TBCL) in *December 1940.*
- **Flag Hoisting -** Shortly after the Lodge's inception, the Indian Tricolour was boldly hoisted on the premises.
- This act served as a strong geopolitical statement that triggered severe protests from the British Ambassador.
- **Strategic Haven -** The noncompliant gesture officially established Thailand as a central hub and foundation for anti-colonial dissent.
- **Transition to Political Nexus -** With the onset of World War II in Southeast Asia, the Lodge quickly turned from cultural diplomacy to an active political and intelligence operational base for the Indian diaspora.

Who are the key protagonists and what is the intelligence pipeline?

- **Sardar Giani Pritam Singh -** A Sikh missionary and Ghadar Party veteran who utilized local Gurdwaras and the TBCL to preach revolutionary ideals.
- He established the critical, covert intelligence pipeline with Major Iwaichi Fujiwara (head of the Japanese intelligence unit, *F-Kikan*).
- **The Indian National Council (INC) -** Founded in ***December 1941*** at the Silpakorn Theatre in Bangkok by TBCL nationalists.
- It is founded with Swami Satyananda Puri as President and Debnath Das as Secretary.
- It bridged the gap between civilian expatriates and early military mobilizations.
- **The Indian Independence League (IIL) -** Rash Behari Bose established the IIL at Tokyo, in 1942.
- The political body coordinating East Asian chapters to channel civilian resources and former Prisoners of War (PoWs) into a structured resistance.
- **INA Framework & Legacy –** Rash Behari Bose laid the foundational framework for the Indian National Army (INA), recruiting British Indian prisoners of war.
- He later handed over leadership of the League and the INA to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, ensuring its ultimate expansion.

What is the significance of the Bangkok Conference?

- The Bangkok Conference, held at the Silpakorn Theatre ***on June 15–23, 1942***, brought together over a hundred representatives of Indian communities from across Burma, Malaya, and Singapore.
- **Consolidation of Factions -** It unified diverse, fragmented nationalist factions across Southeast Asia under a single, coherent political framework, designating the IIL as the central authority.
- **The Blueprint for the INA-** It adopted a comprehensive ***34-point resolution***, laid out the official structure of the INA, composed of volunteers and former Prisoners of Wars (PoW).
- **Preserving Strategic Autonomy -** The resolution strictly mandated that the INA would be supervised by the IIL rather than the Japanese military.
- It urged Tokyo to formally recognize India as an independent nation, ensuring the movement retained its agency despite relying on Japanese wartime logistics.

How the regional mobilization transformed under Netaji's command?

- **The Tragic Vacuum-** In March 1942, a fatal plane crash killed Swami Satyananda Puri and Sardar Pritam Singh en route to Tokyo, threatening to derail the momentum before the June conference.
- **The Arrival of Netaji (1943)-** Subhas Chandra Bose's arrival provided the charismatic, unyielding military leadership needed to unify regional councils.
- **Total Mobilization -** Netaji accelerated the transition into a mass-mobilization campaign, elevating the relationship with Japan into a high-stakes diplomatic partnership.
- It secures the full recognition for the *Provisional Government of Free India (Arzi Hukumat-e-Azad Hind).*
- **The TBCL as a Covert Bridge -** As the INA marched toward the Indian border, the TBCL remained a vital sanctuary, providing civilian, intellectual, and logistical cover for the families and networks backing the frontline troops.

How does it survive after the world war?

- **Allied Suppression and Re-emergence-** Banned by Allied forces in 1945 with its leaders imprisoned, the TBCL was resiliently revived in 1946 through the efforts of Pandit Raghunath Sharma.
- **Living Archive -** Today, the Lodge stands as a living museum in Bangkok, housing rare texts, historical photographs, and documents managed by the descendants of the Indian diaspora.
- It remains an enduring monument to Indo-Thai historic friendship and the shared struggle against colonial rule.

What is the way forward?

- **Institutionalizing Shared Heritage -** India's *Act East Policy* should move beyond maritime security and trade.
- It should actively preserve and fund external historical landmarks like the TBCL, integrating them into an official transnational freedom trail.
- **Declassifying Southeast Asian Archives -** Joint historical research commissions between India, Thailand, and Japan are needed to digitize and study regional records.
- It ensures this pivotal chapter of the external freedom struggle moves from the margins to the mainstream of historical textbooks.
- **Leveraging Diaspora Diplomacy-** The deep-rooted social networks of the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia, which originally sustained the INA, should be celebrated as vital cultural bridges for modern bilateral

relations.

Reference

The Hindu | Thai-Bharat Cultural Lodge (TBCL)

