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Perspective

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose: Person behind the Statue

Gargi Chakravartty^{1*}

*Correspondence: gchakravartty@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose has recently acquired political and academic prominence and in *Azaadi Ka Amritkaal*, he is being considered a relatively lesser known freedom fighter. This I find very surprising as his birthday, 23rd January has always been a public holiday in West Bengal since early fifties during the Congress regime. His marching song, ‘*Kadam Kadam Badhae Jaa, Khushi ke Geet gaye jaa, yeh zindagi hai qaum ki, Tu Kaum Pe Lutaye Ja....*’ still resonates in our mind. His patriotic spirit, his self-sacrifice, his mission to overthrow the British, his broadcast messages through Azad Hind Radio, his slogan of *Delhi Chalo* is known to us from our childhood. The story of his sudden escape to Europe via Kabul on January 16, 1945 in the disguise of Mohammad Ziauddin and then his hazardous journey in a submarine vessel from Germany to South East Asia in early 1943 with his close associate Abid Hasan may not be known to this generation, but his I.N.A struggle has been given due space in all textbooks. However, there are many aspects of his life other than his Azad Hind Fauj which are unfortunately kept in the dark. Therefore in this presentation, I will try to portray the life sketch both political and personal of such a multi-dimensional personality in a nutshell.

PATH OF ARMED STRUGGLE

His disillusionment and loss of faith in Gandhian strategy of non-violence and the sluggish and casual attitude of the national leaders after the civil-disobedience movement was a definite reason for Subhas to think of a new path, but not the only one. His rift with Gandhi and Nehru in late thirties is widely known and now being publicised by a section of historians. What should be recalled is the reason behind it. It was the fallout of a long drawn ideological tussle between the Right-wing and Left-wing sections within the Congress², that led to a political stalemate of no-return for Subhas.

When Subhas was re-elected as President of the Tripuri Congress session in 1939 against the official or Gandhi’s candidate, Pattabhi Sitaramaiyya, relationship of Subhas with both Gandhi and Nehru got strained. At that juncture, Gandhi under the pressure of the right-wing stalwarts opposed the candidature of Subhas even ignoring the request from Rabindranath Tagore. Nehru, who was ideologically and personally close to Subhas, remained non-

¹ Former Associate Professor, Department of History, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi, Delhi

² For details see Bose, 1967, p. 402, “The efforts of the Gandhiites to consolidate themselves is nothing else than ‘Right consolidation’ within the Congress..... When the danger was detected and the Leftist began to organise in self-defence, a furore arose in Gandhian circles.”

committal. He was apprehensive about an imminent split within the Congress at a critical time of the country (Gordon, 1997)³.

Subhas did not expect this neutrality from Nehru. It needs to be remembered that Subhas in his Presidential election in Haripura (1938) and re-election in Tripuri (1939) in the Central Provinces had been fully supported by the Leftists within the Congress and outside including the Communists (Gordon, 1997, p. 374). Subhas out of anguish over the unexpected silence of Nehru at a time when right-wingers like Sardar Patel came out vocally against him, wrote a long and “brutally frank” letter to Nehru on March 28, 1939. He wrote: “Was there nothing wrong in Sardar Patel making full use of the name and authority of Mahatma Gandhi for electioneering purposes? Was there nothing wrong in Sardar Patel stating that my re-election would be harmful to the country’s cause” (Bose, 1997, pp. 244-245).

Subhas himself felt that the Gandhites did not approve his friendly attitude towards the Leftists. For them it was “unduly friendly” (Bose, 1997, p. 272). Since 1938, Subhas was persuading Congress “to send an ultimatum to the British Government demanding independence within a certain period and start preparing the country for a national struggle” (Bose, 1997, p. 273). Subhas was engrossed in his idea of how “to establish Leftist ascendancy in the Congress” (Bose, 1997, p. 275). He felt that “Gandhism has ceased to be revolutionary” (Bose, 1997). He did not agree with Gandhian strategy of non-violence. Finally in May 1939, he formed the Forward Bloc, a Left outfit, because to him Gandhism had started to stagnate. Soon after, he resigned as President of All India Congress Committee in Calcutta.

However, behind his new path there was another point totally overlooked so far. He wanted a united India, one front to bargain with the British during the process of transfer of power. With that intention he met both Jinnah, the President of Muslim League and Savarkar, the President of Hindu Mahasabha. His interviews proved useless. Subhas proposed that “in the event of such a united struggle taking place, Jinnah would be the first Prime Minister of Free India” (Bose, 1967, p. 344), but Jinnah gave no importance to that proposal. About Savarkar, Subhas wrote: “Mr Savarkar seemed to be oblivious of the international situation and was only thinking how Hindus could secure military training by entering Britain’s army in India” (Bose, 1967). On the basis of these interviews, Subhas concluded that “nothing could be expected from either the Muslim League or the Hindu Mahasabha” (Bose, 1967).

Being disgusted with the national situation as he realised that Indian independence would not come as “a gift from a future Labour government of Britain”⁴ (Bose, 1997, p. 301), he chalked out a plan to escape from India to launch an armed struggle with the help of a foreign power which stood against Britain. Initially he had the hope of getting support from Soviet Union, but the invasion of Germany on Soviet Union demoralised him. Then he negotiated with the leaders of the axis powers – Germany and Italy and started the process of recruitment of Indian National Army with nearly four thousand Indian prisoners-of-war in German and Italian captivity. He formed his Indian National Army and the tricolour of Indian National Congress became its national flag. Initially “the image of a springing tiger”, the emblem of Tipu Sultan’s flag was put in place of *Charkha*, though later the I.N.A in South East Asia carried the flag with the emblem of Gandhian *Charkha* (Bose, 1997, p. 210). The image of springing tiger remained as an emblem on the shoulder of the uniform of the I.N.A soldiers.

³ Nehru’s letter to Gandhi in April 1939 shows that Nehru wanted “to prevent a serious split in the Congress”. “Nehru urges Subhas to compromise with Gandhi and to actively help the latter form the Working Committee.”

⁴ Bose, 1997, p. 301, “I am honestly convinced that the British Government will never recognise India’s demand for independence.”

Jai Hind was coined as India's national greeting, a lasting legacy to independent India (Bose, 1997, p. 211).

Subhas wanted to take advantage of the World War crisis. For him the entry of Japan into the Second World War on December 7, 1941 in alliance with the Axis powers (Nazi bloc) created "new strategic possibilities" (Bose, 1997, p. 213). After the fall of Singapore (a British colony) on February 15, 1942, Subhas made his first public broadcast to India on February 19, 1942, through his Azad Hind Radio (Bose, 1997, p. 213). Since then he was very enthusiastic about his mission to March to Delhi. In fact, "the first I.N.A was formed on February 17, 1942, two days after the British surrendered to Japanese forces in Singapore" (Bose, 1997, p. 239). Subhas considered India's war of independence as a "global struggle", and so in June 1942, he sent a message "to link up Indian nationalists all over the world in one all-embracing organisation" (Bose, 1997, p. 225).

In spite of his indomitable spirit to move towards Delhi, the sudden news of the setback of the Japanese forced him to retreat. With the fall of Berlin on May 9, 1945, as the Soviet Red Army hoisted the flag at the Reichstag, the world witnessed the end of Nazism and Hitler. Within a few months, the bombing of atom bombs by America on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on 6th and 9th August, 1945 virtually brought the end of war in Japan. Subhas along with his fellow comrade Habibur Rahman had to leave and their plane crashed on August 18, 1945. He died leaving behind his sole witness of the tragedy Habibur and the nurse in the hospital to give us the last account of his life. Our country was shocked and devastated at the news. His last message to Indians on 15 August, 1945 reflects his indomitable spirit. "I have only one word to say. Do not be depressed at our temporary failure..... There is no power on earth that can keep Indian enslaved. India shall be free and before long. Jai Hind" (Bose, 1997, p. 327).

RELATIONSHIP OF SUBHAS WITH CONGRESS PARTICULARLY GANDHI

A temporary period of tension and strained relationship between Gandhi and Subhas has been widely publicised and it is all the more done by a section of historians who depend on military archival and government reports. Let me start from the last phase of their lives. Gandhi had great admiration for Netaji, his spirit of self-sacrifice and discipline. On February 24, 1946 after the death of Subhas, Gandhi wrote: "My praise and admiration can go no further" (Gandhi, February 24, 1946). On April 14, 1946, *Harijan* carried a report that reassured Gandhi when he came to know that Subhas asked the I.N.A veterans like Shah Nawaz Khan on their return to India to work for national unity in a non-violent manner under the direction of the Congress. Gandhi "had given due recognition to Bose, but discarded his use of violent means" (Gordon, 1997, p. 552). After his death, Gandhi wrote a letter to Amrit Kaur on August 24, 1945 that "He was undoubtedly a patriot, though misguided" (Gandhi, 1994 as quoted in Gordon, 1997, p. 551).

Nehru was so close to Subhas that when Kamla Nehru was on the death bed, he asked Subhas to remain with him at a moment of his personal crisis. But the difference with him started later and reached a point of no-return when Subhas turned to the Axis powers, meaning the fascist powers for help. Nehru said, "The fact that a particular country is an enemy of Britain does not necessarily mean the country is our friend" (Som, 2005, p. 162).

British Government put some leading officers of the I.N.A on trial for treason against the Emperor. It was conducted by a military court in the Red Fort in Delhi. Three of them, Captain Shah Nawaz Khan, Captain P.K Sehgal and a Sikh Lieutenant G S Dhillon had to face the trial. Eminent lawyers rushed to join the defence team. "Even Jawaharlal Nehru, who had said in 1943 that he would personally go to the front and fight Bose and the Japanese if

they invaded India, donned robes which he had not worn for decades and met several times with the defendants. Nehru's speech on December 24, 1945, "went on to extoll the patriotism of the I.N.A soldiers"⁵ (Gordon, 1997, p. 552). Unfortunately, Subhas was not alive to witness this memorable trial and listened to Nehru's speech.

Close relationship with Gandhi goes back to Subhas' student days. Even after ranking fourth position in Indian Civil service examination in London, Subhas decided to resign as he was not prepared to serve British bureaucracy. Instead he wanted to join the 1921 Non-Cooperation Movement led by Gandhi. What Subhas wrote to his elder brother Sarat on April 23, 1931 is worth recollecting: "I received a letter from mother saying that in spite of what father and others think, she prefers the ideal for which Mahatma Gandhi stands. I cannot tell you how happy I have been to receive such a letter. It will be worth a treasure to me as it has removed something like a burden from my mind" (Gordon, 1997). His mother Prabhavati Devi had great influence on him. His political mentor, Chittaranjan Das also inspired him to give up I.C.S for Indian nationalism.

Popular perception is one of strained relationship of Gandhi with Subhas, mainly the incidents of Presidential election of Subhas in the Tripuri session of the Congress in 1939 are often being cited. It is true that Gandhi was under the pressure of the Right-wing Congressmen like Sardar Patel, Birla, the main financier of the Congress and the section which was averse to Subhas' Leftist leanings.

However, Gandhi and Subhas remained close to each other as subsequent events reveal. Before leaving for Europe in his farewell meeting with Gandhi in June 1940, "Subhas had promised to contact him once he would complete his mission of liberating Indian from British rule" (Bose, 2004, pp. 117-121). Subhas from abroad extended his wholehearted support to Gandhi's Quit India Movement of 1942 (Bose, 2004, p. 135). He expressed his feeling of not being part of it through a broadcast message through Azad Hind Radio on August 17, 1942. "During the last two decades, I have been through every phase of our national struggle from 1921 till 1940. I naturally feel unhappy that today I am not at home to participate in this last campaign. But it will not be long before I am at your side again" (Bose, 2004, p. 135). It is my assumption that if the Quit India Movement would have started in 1940, Subhas would not have left the country. He was too impulsive and impatient at the state of affairs at that time.

Subhas understood that the Quit India Movement was not that encompassing like the one of 1921 as it failed to draw the Muslim communities. "He therefore called upon the progressive elements of Muslim League, Majlis-i-Ahrar, the Jamiat-ul-Ulema, the Azad Muslim League, the Akali Dal and last but not the least, the Krishak Praja Party of Bengal to form a broad based patriotic front" (Bose, 2004, pp. 132-139). Subhas named the I.N.A brigades as Gandhi, Nehru, Azad in "a deliberate effort to make common cause with the struggle at home" (Bose, 1997, p. 252). His connection with Gandhi a very significant aspect has been overlooked by a section of historians.

The message broadcasted by Subhas on Gandhi's 74th birthday in 1943 from Bangkok reflects his admiration for him because he brought unity among masses of all communities. About Gandhi, he said, "No single man could have achieved more in one single lifetime under similar circumstances" (Bose, 2006, p. 259). When I.N.A's Gandhi Brigade moved towards Burma led by Inayat Kiani, Subhas heard the news of Kasturba's demise. Immediately he sent a moving message. "Kasturba was a mother to Indian people", "Mahatma Gandhi called upon the British to quit India and save India from the horrors of modern war. The insolent reply of the British was to

⁵ For the entire speech of Nehru on December 24, 1945 see Nehru (2012, pp. 279-280).

throw him into prison like an ordinary criminal. He and his noble consort would rather die in prison than come out free in an enslaved India.” Therefore “to avenge the death of their mother Kasturba”, Subhas gave a call to defeat the British imperialists (Bose, 2006, p. 270).

Gandhi’s blessings were always with Subhas, whose courage and determination made him proud. He was impressed of his self-sacrifice and his idea of unity irrespective of class and community. Subhas was in touch with Gandhi and the Indian people through his Azad Hind Radio. A section of politicians and historians have been whipping up on the strained relationship between the two. Their selective narrative never mentioned his address to Gandhi over the Rangoon Radio on July 6, 1944 where Subhas was the first national leader to address Gandhi as ‘the Father of Our Nation’. It was almost a year before his death Subhas ended his address with the following words: “Father of our nation! In this holy war for India’s liberation we ask for your blessings and good wishes. Jai Hind” (Bose, 1997, p. 309). I like to conclude this section with what Reba Som in her seminal work, ‘Gandhi, Bose, Nehru and the Making of Modern India’ mentioned. “Gandhi and Subhas, stern father and rebel son, for all their political and ideological differences, drew on the same wellsprings of inspiration, and were actually much closer to each other in basic temperament than is realised” (Som, 2005, pp. 83-84).

HIS VISION OF INDIA

This is an important area which is not being discussed today, stress being given only on his I.N.A struggle (1943-1945). Whereas through his addresses, writings, articles, correspondence, he had left a clear picture of his idea of united India and also the subsequent problems of free India.

Subhas was a deeply religious person influenced by Swami Vivekananda’s preachings, particularly when Swamiji spoke that “India’s progress will be achieved only by the peasant, the washerman, the cobbler and the sweeper.” In his early years, he wrote to his mother about the ongoing “sin and bigotry in the name of religion”, and about “atheism, loss of faith, superstition”⁶ (Bose, 1997, p. 22). Later in his life, he spoke against the religious parties of both Muslims and Hindus which according to Subhas “should not be regarded as representing people” (Bose, 1997, p. 291).

As a student of Philosophy, he delved deep into the essence of all religious sects and in his article titled “My Faith (Philosophical)”, he conclusively felt “the essential nature of reality is LOVE. LOVE is the essence of the universe and is the essential principle in human life” (Bose, 2013, p. 108). His religious faith on Kali cult or power of Mantra etc. was part of his personal life. He kept his religion within his private domain and never used his faith for political reasons or mass mobilisation etc.

Like his political mentor Chittaranjan Das, he also talked on the idea of cultural intimacy with different religious communities. When tension and bitterness among religious groups surfaced at the All Parties meetings in 1928, young Subhas at the Maharashtra Provincial Conference in Poona on May 3, same year, emphasized in his address the need to “facilitate cultural rapprochement, a dose of secular and scientific training is necessary” (Bose, 1997, pp. 86-87). He felt that “Fanaticism is the greatest thorn in the path of cultural intimacy and there is no better remedy for fanaticism than secular and scientific education.” Here I like to stress that in a multi-religious nation like India, secularism does not mean absence of religion but state neutrality to religion and that means acceptance, not just tolerance, and space for all religious groups.

⁶ See Bose (1997, p. 22) “Lack of faith, atheism and superstition have brought our religion down and vulgarized it.” He also wrote about the “hypocritical Brahmins.”

As President of Haripura Congress session in 1938, Subhas gave priority to improve the Hindu-Muslim relationship. He spelt out the clauses of the resolution on Fundamental Rights, and then he said, “These clauses of the Fundamental Rights resolution make it clear that there should be no interference in matter of conscience, religion or culture and a minority is entitled to keep its personal law without any change in this respect being imposed by the majority” (Bose, 1997, p. 202). He also said, “On this question, the Congress policy is one of live and let live – a policy of complete non-interference in matters of conscience, religion and culture as well as of cultural autonomy for the different linguistic areas. The Muslims have, therefore, nothing to fear in the event of India winning her freedom – on the contrary they have everything to gain” (Bose, 1997, p. 203). How optimistic he was!

Even during his period of armed struggle with *Azad Hind Fauj*, Subhas stressed on his idea of communal harmony. He not only introduced inter-dining and cultural intimacy among the soldiers but also delivered lectures on “Unity of India, Past and Present” in which he spoke how the Hindus and Muslims lived as brothers during the Mughal rule. He chose the tomb of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar in Rangoon as the venue of a ceremonial parade on September 26, 1943 to convey his message of *Azad Hind Fauj*’s ‘March to Delhi’. On that occasion, he spoke “We, Indians, regardless of religious faiths, cherish the memory of Bahadur Shah.....because he was the man under whose flag fought Indians from all provinces, Indians professing different religious faiths, the man under whose sacred flag freedom loving Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs fought side by side in the war.... which we Indians call the First War of Independence” (Bose, 2006, pp. 97-99).

On October 21, 1943, Subhas formally declared the formation of the Provisional Government of Azad India in Singapore. While entitling the allegiance of every Indian, the Proclamation “guaranteed religious liberty as well as equal rights and equal opportunities to its citizens” (Bose, 2006, pp. 108-120 as quoted in Bose, 1997, p. 255). Sugata Bose has mentioned about the “spirit of unity and solidarity among all religious and linguistic groups” (Bose, 1997, p. 255). This is not being highlighted today and this is the most important legacy he had left for us.

Today, many things are not being told, for example, what he had conceptualised as his vision of Free India which he had published in an article “Free India and its Problems” in August 1942 which was later reprinted in *Azad Hind*. He wrote: “The State will guarantee complete religious and cultural freedom for individuals and groups and there will be no state religion. In the matter of political and economic rights, there will be perfect equality among the whole population. When every individual has employment, food and education and has freedom in religious and cultural matters, there will be no more any minorities problem in India” (Bose, 1997, p. 290).

In this same article, he blamed the British for their deliberate attempt to propagate against the Muslims. He wrote: “British propaganda has deliberately created the impression that the Indian Mohammedans are against the independence movement. But this is altogether false. The fact is that in the nationalist movement, there is a large percentage of Mohammedans. The President of the Indian National Congress today is Azad – a Mohammedan. The vast majority of the Indian Mohammedans are anti-British and want to see India free”⁷ (Bose, 1997, p. 290).

⁷ The resolution on Purna Swaraj was passed at the Lahore Congress session at the initiative of Nehru and Subhas Bose. But much before the first person to move a resolution on Purna Swaraj at the annual session of the Congress party in 1921 was Maulana Hasrat Mohani (1875-1951). But it was opposed by Gandhi. Hasrat Mohani also gave the slogan Inquilab Zindabad during the freedom struggle in 1921, a slogan which Bhagat Singh immortalised forever.

LEFTIST IDENTITY

Subhas was a pronounced Leftist. His earlier speeches at All India Trade Union Congress in Calcutta on July 4, 1931 and at the All India Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Karachi on April 5, 1931 highlighted socialism, “a new form of socialism which we may hail as Indian socialism” (Bose, 1997, p. 112). He said: “To summarise what I have said I want a Socialist republic in India” (Bose, 1997, p. 112). But so far Communism was concerned, Subhas felt “anti-religious and atheistic element in the ideology would combine to make Communism unappealing to Indian.” In his opinion, “Communism will not be adopted in India” (Bose, 1997, p. 98).

So far Leftism was concerned, he accused the Congress for Rightist consolidation. But for the Congress “Leftist consolidation was a crime” (Bose, 1997, p. 276). While justifying his formation of Forward Bloc on May 19, 1939, he wrote a thesis in Kabul in March 1941, popularly known as Kabul thesis in which he wrote: “After the attainment of political independence, Leftism will mean Socialism and the task before the people will be reconstruction of national life on a Socialist basis” (Bose, 1997, p. 282). Nehru however did not approve his formation of Forward Bloc, as he felt that this move would weaken the Congress.

AS A ROMANTIC LOVER

His indomitable love for the country and his self-sacrifice and courage made him immortal forever but his life story will remain incomplete unless a few lines on his romantic love towards a woman, Austrian by birth and Christian by religion is not narrated. She was his stenographer Emilie Schenkl, whom he met on June 24, 1934. His “working relation developed into a close personal bond” (Bose, 1997, p. 102). He married her secretly on December 26, 1936 (Bose, 1997, p. 129). Being uncertain of his future, Subhas wrote to her, “.....but believe me you will always live in my heart, in my thoughts and in my dreams. If fate thus separate us in this life, I shall long for you in my next life” (Bose, 1997, p. 111).

Today when in India, laws are initiated in some states to ban inter-faith relationships, we need to remember Subhas who never opposed such relationships and rather chose to love a woman of a different country, different religion, different culture, different language and his love was eternal. Their only child, Anita bears the symbol of that love.

People thronging at India Gate in Delhi to get a glimpse of the statue of Subhas in his military uniform should remember him not only for his widely recognised and publicised armed struggle of I.N.A but also for his vision of a United India with secular ethos and socialist structure. And finally let him also be remembered for his eternal love for Emilie, to whom he wrote: “You are the first woman I have loved. God grant that you may also be the last. Adieu, my dearest” (Bose, 1997, p. 131).

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