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Amartya Sen on Nationalism

Netaji Research Bureau
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(Translated from Tamil by A.R. Venkatachalapathy)
Sarat Bose and Aung San, July 1946
Photo by Sisir K. Bose
NRB NEWS 2007

Netaji Research Bureau, founded by Dr Sisir Kumar Bose in 1957, turned fifty in January 2007. The institution went from strength to strength in it Golden Jubilee year, living up to its ideals from the past and charting innovative new directions for the future.

The final volume twelve, Chalo Delhi, of Netaji’s Collected Works comprising his speeches and writings between 1943 and 1945, edited by Dr Sisir Kumar Bose and Sugata Bose, was ceremonially released on 8th January 2007 by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Union Minister of External Affairs, in New Delhi in the presence of Shri S. Jayakumar, Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, and Shri Inder Kumar Gujral, former Prime Minister of India.

The glittering ceremony, organized in collaboration with the Confederation of Indian Industry, took place in the Taj Mahal Hotel on Man Singh Road. The diplomatic corps of New Delhi and many distinguished guests were in attendance. Professor Sugata Bose introduced the book and Professor Krishna Bose spoke about the fifty-year history of Netaji Research Bureau.
A fitting programme was drawn up to observe the 110th birth anniversary of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and the Netaji Research Bureau Golden Jubilee Conference on “The Second World War and Asian Independence”.

The Conference was inaugurated by Shri Priya Ranjan Das Munshi, Union Cabinet Minister for Information and Broadcasting and Parliamentary Affairs, who paid rich tributes to the work done by Dr Sisir Kumar Bose and Professor Krishna Bose.
On 21st January 2007 the Netaji Oration 2007 on “The Eve of Freedom: Subhas Bose and Aung San” was delivered by Professor Christopher Bayly, Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial and Naval History, University of Cambridge, and the Sisir Bose Lecture on “Revolt in Malaya: the Indian Connection” by Dr Tim Harper, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Cambridge.

Professor Sugata Bose presided over the Oration and the Lecture. Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, graced the occasion and listened to Professor Bayly and Dr Harper with rapt attention. Professor Rajat Kanta Ray provided a commentary on both the Oration and the Lecture.

On 22nd January 2007 at 4 pm the Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon Memorial Session was held with lectures on “The Men and Women of the Indian National Army” by Professor Joyce Lebra, Professor Emeritus of History, University of Colorado, and “Japan and the Indian National Army” by Professor Nobuko Nagasaki, Professor of History, Ryukoku University.
The traditional Netaji Birthday Assembly was held on the morning of 23rd January 2007 presided over by Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, the Governor of West Bengal. Professor Sugata Bose delivered the welcome address. Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi gave another thoughtful and eloquent presidential address.

At 6 pm the Prem Kumar Sahgal Memorial Session followed with lectures on “A War to make Men Free? Britain, India and the US in the Second World War and After” by Professor Leonard A. Gordon, Professor Emeritus of History, City University of New York, and “The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army: A Singapore Perspective” by Ambassador Kesavapany, Director, and Dr Asudul Iqbal Latif, Fellow, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.
Datin Janaki Thevar Athinahappan, Professor Christopher Bayly, Professor Leonard Gordon and Professor Joyce Lebra made short speeches.

Mrs Krishna Bose gave the vote of thanks and expressed her gratitude to all those who had supported the Netaji Research Bureau for fifty years.
Pramita Mallick and Ishita Ganguly had performed the opening music. Following the speeches “Dohar” presented a special birthday concert.

They had learned from Professor Sugata Bose the INA song “Sab se Uncha hai Duniya mein Jhanda Hamara” which they performed with great gusto along with their own repertoire of songs.
On the occasion of Dr Sisir Kumar Bose’s 87th birth anniversary Swapan Basu gave a recital of folk songs on 3rd February, 2007.


A special ceremony was held on 19th June 2007 at the historic Raffles Hotel in Singapore to release volume twelve, Chalo Delhi, of Netaji’s Collected Works in Southeast Asia. Since Netaji had first given his ‘Chalo Delhi’ call to the Azad Hind Fauj in Singapore, this was an especially appropriate venue for the book’s launch outside India by Shri Pranab Mukherjee, Union Minister of External Affairs.

Shri Pranab Mukherjee accompanied by Professor Sugata Bose paid tribute to the INA martyrs at the Memorial on the seaface in Singapore prior to the ceremony. President S.R. Nathan of Singapore hosted a lunch in honour of Professor Sugata Bose at the Istana and presented him a book on the Indian diaspora.
Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan said he was very impressed and deeply moved to visit the Netaji Museum of the Netaji Research Bureau in Calcutta on 23rd August 2007. He expressed “strong admiration” for Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and recalled Netaji’s bond and ties with Japan. He paid a floral tribute to Netaji in the room that Subhas Chandra Bose used as a study as President of the Indian National Congress.

Upon arrival at Netaji Bhawan he was received by Mrs. Krishna Bose, Chairperson of the Netaji Research Bureau. He saw the car in which Netaji escaped in January 1941. Prime Minister Abe was especially enchanted to see photographs of Netaji’s submarine journey in 1943 especially the transfer from the German to Japanese submarine in a rubber boat in the Indian Ocean. He himself identified many pictures of Netaji with Gandhi, Tagore and Nehru. In the Asia room of the Netaji Museum he saw photographs of Netaji addressing the Greater East Asia Conference and visiting the historic Meiji Shrine in Tokyo. Mrs. Krishna Bose presented him with a DVD film of Netaji, the final volume of Netaji Collected works titled ‘Chalo Delhi’ and a photograph of Netaji going to see the Japanese Emperor. Prime Minister Abe said that Indo–Japanese solidarity will be further strengthened in the future by following Subhas Chandra Bose. Prime Minister Abe expressed his strong determination to strengthen bilateral relations between India and Japan which would be a fulfillment of Netaji’s dream.
On 1st September 2007 the Sarat Chandra Bose Lecture 2007 on “India at 60 – Achievements and Challenges” was delivered by Shri Somnath Chatterjee, Speaker, Lok Sabha.

The Embassy and Consulate-General of Japan in collaboration with the Netaji Research Bureau organized special lectures on “Two Booses- Subhas Chandra Bose and Rash Behari Bose –and the People of Japan”.

Professor Nobuko Nagasaki, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, Japan spoke on Rash Behari Bose and Prof. Krishna Bose spoke on Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. The lectures were held at the India International Centre in New Delhi on 16th November, 2007, and at the Netaji Research Bureau, Kolkata, on 18th November, 2007. Prof. Rajat Kanta Ray, Vice-Chancellor, Visva Bharati University, presided in Kolkata.

On 19th November 2007 Permanent Black in association with Netaji Research Bureau organized a lecture by Professor Martha Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics, University of Chicago on the themes of her recent book “The Clash Within: Democracy, Religious Violence, and India’s Future. Professor Jasodhara Bagchi, Founder- Director, School of Women’s Studies, Jadavpur University chaired the lecture.
The Special Netaji Oration 2007 on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee of India’s Independence and Golden Jubilee of Netaji Research Bureau was delivered by Amartya Sen, Lamont University Professor, Harvard University on “Is Nationalism a Curse or a Boon?” The Governor, Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi, was the chief guest.

The full text of Professor Amartya Sen’s Netaji Oration is featured in this special Golden Jubilee Number of The Oracle. Professors Rajat Kanta Ray, Pranab Bardhan, Kaushik Basu, Saugata Roy, Purushottam Bhattacharya and others took part in the question-and-answer session. Professor Sugata Bose moderated the discussion and Professor Krishna Bose gave the vote of thanks.
Netaji Museum continued to be a major attraction for visitors from different parts of India and abroad. There was a significant increase in the number of visitors in 2006-2007 as compared with 2005-2006 which was reflected in the receipt of museum gate fees. Many young students from disadvantaged backgrounds were allowed free entry.

Distinguished visitors included Mr George Yeo, Foreign Minister of Singapore, on 20th January, 2007; Mr Yoshihiro Hasegawa of the Japanese Foreign Ministry on 13th March, 2007; an ASEAN delegation comprising members from Myanmar, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam on 27th April 2007;

Mr Shivshankar Menon, Foreign Secretary of India, on 23rd June 2007; Mr Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan, on 23rd August 2007, Mr Somnath Chatterjee, Speaker of the Lok Sabha, on 1st September 2007; Mr Robin Herbert (son of John Herbert, Governor of Bengal, 1939-42) on 1st November 2007;
Mr Hideaki Domichi, Ambassador of Japan, on 22nd December 2007; Mr Hiroshi Yamada, Mayor of Suginami City, Tokyo, with his party including Yoshihiro Wada and Michiki Nemoto on 22nd December 2007; Mr David M. Aloax, High Commissioner of Canada, on 28th December 2007, Professor Wang Gungwu of the National University of Singapore on 28th December 2007; and Professor Uma Mesthrie of the University of Western Cape and Ms Kirti Menon of Johannesburg (grand-nieces of Mahatma Gandhi) on 29th December 2007.

Scholars and students came to study as usual in the Bureau's library and archives. In addition to Chalo Delhi, a beautiful issue of The Oracle was published in January 2007 containing letters and photographs of the fifty years of NRB.
SPECIAL NETAJI ORATION 2007
IS NATIONALISM A BOON OR A CURSE?
Amartya Sen

Exactly two years before India’s independence, on the 15th of August of 1945, in his last message to his nation, Subhas Chandra Bose wrote: “There is no power on earth that can keep India enslaved. India shall be free and before long.” That confidence, based on a determined commitment to a great cause – that of ending imperial domination of India – brings out a hugely appealing face of nationalism. It can inspire and motivate the people of a country subjected to the bondage of alien rule and the internal loss of self-confidence that goes with such rule. Even the rousing statement about the inability of any power on earth to keep India enslaved, which Netaji articulated, can be seen in the context of the need to overcome what Rabindranath Tagore had called “the worst form of bondage” – “the bondage of dejection, which keeps men hopelessly chained in loss of faith in themselves.”

It is important to see that this positive role of nationalism need not be confined only to those who happen to be, themselves, victims of foreign domination and of related indignities imposed on a subdued nation. The fight against national subjugation need not be restricted only to persons who are born in the suppressed nation. The search for justice against captivity can inspire others who come from elsewhere but who choose to join that struggle, moved by the cause of independence and of regeneration of an overpowered nation, and who come to develop a close bond with that underdog society. Annie Besant and Charles Andrews may not have been natives of India, but their dedication and role in the pursuit of freedom and dignity in India were important for India, and also, I would argue, for them too, since the chosen identifications yielded a strong sense of purpose that enhanced the lives of these outreachers as well.

The inspiring power of a chosen, rather than inherited – identification is brought out clearly enough by Lord Byron’s lament about having to leave Greece after the bonds he had developed with Greece and also his chosen commitment to work for its independence:

Maid of Athens, ere we part,
Give, oh give me back my heart!

Because of the possibility of such chosen – and not just inherited – identification, open to anyone in the world, nationalism need not have the parochial quality that it might otherwise have had because of being locally confined, through birth. There is always something of a universalizing potential in nationalism, which is particularly relevant when the cause involved is that of the underdogs of the world. People choose to work where they think they might achieve something of value, and from Mahatma Gandhi in South Africa to Mother Teresa in India, there are plenty of wonderful examples of chosen identifications that show the possibility of global participation in national or regional causes. Nationalism can have universalist inclusion, and it would be a mistake to see it as incurably territorial.
Nationalism can clearly have other virtues as well. Netaji pointed to another role of nationalism in his Presidential address at the 51st Session of the Indian National Congress at Haripura in February 1938. He touched on the fact that a sense of national identity can work powerfully against the divisiveness of communal distinctions. Subhas Chandra talked about the attempt by India’s British rulers “to separate the different communities and put them into water-tight compartments.” This point was particularly apt in India in 1938, when the British Raj, in its last days, was still rather involved in emphasizing the divisions within India between different religious communities, which was widely seen in India as being exaggerated by the Raj as a justification for continued British imperial rule.

The point about the unifying role of nationalism does, however, have a more general and pervasive relevance. No matter how generated, divisiveness among the people of a country can be resisted, in general, with a unifying identity, and nationalism can indeed play that constructive role. Nationalism did rise to that challenge in India in confronting communal tensions that preceded the partition of India (though with uneven success), and indeed it remained relevant also after that, through its contribution to the resistance to the separatism of religions, languages, and regions, thereby helping to keep what remained of India reasonably united. I shall discuss later on in this talk how this unifying and positive role can sometimes be extremely important not just in India, but also in other countries as well. I will illustrate the point with the example of contemporary Britain, since the cultivation of divisiveness in colonial India by the British rulers is now matched, I would argue, by an inadvertent nurturing of religion-based communal identities within Britain itself.

2

It is not hard to see that nationalism can indeed be a boon, offering benefits that are significant and substantial. What is, however, equally obvious is that nationalism can also be a source of huge conflicts, hostilities and violence. Netaji himself pointed to this recognition, in the same Presidential Address at Haripura, that a country with a strong sense of nationalism can be a source of adversity for other countries, referring – interestingly enough in the light of subsequent events – to Japan as being “militant, aggressive and imperialist.” While Bose did give priority to Indian nationalism is his chosen actions, particularly in creating and leading the Indian National Army, mainly recruited from captured Indian soldiers in Japanese hands, yet his clear understanding that aggressiveness and imperialism can follow from the extreme nationalism of Japan of that period is not in doubt. Netaji obviously did have to balance the arguments in different directions, and chose to give priority to the fight for independence of his subjugated nation, even though this inescapably involved his being aligned to a power that was, in his own judgment, aggressive and imperialist (though not present in India in that imperial form).

The dual attitude to Japanese nationalism is a widespread feature of Indian thinking over those years. Rabindranath Tagore appreciated and praised the importance of the Japanese experience in economic and social development as something
that gave hope and some basis of self-confidence to countries outside the West. There was indeed pervasive admiration in India for Japan for its demonstration that an Asian nation could rival the West in industrial development and economic progress, and Tagore noted with great satisfaction that Japan had “in giant strides left centuries of inaction behind, overtaking the present time in its foremost achievement.” This was inspirational for other nations outside the West, and it “has broken,” Tagore said, “the spell under which we lay in torpor for ages, taking it to be the normal condition of certain races living in certain geographical limits." In this role the contribution of Japanese nationalism was clearly significant.

However, in the same lecture on “Nationalism in Japan,” given in Japan in 1916, Tagore went on to criticize sharply the emergence of aggressive nationalism in Japan and its new role as an imperialist, and as E.P. Thompson, the historian, has noted, “Tagore’s outspoken criticisms did not please Japanese audiences and the welcome given to him on first arrival soon cooled.” While Tagore’s worries and concerns were already strong in 1916, the subsequent events, particularly the Japanese treatment of China, shocked him deeply. Rabindranath wrote to Yone Noguchi, a nationalist Japanese poet, who was a friend of Tagore, in 1938 (as it happens in the same year in which Netaji had pointed to the imperialist nature of the-then Japan): “You know I have genuine love for the Japanese people and it is sure to hurt me too painfully to go and watch crowds of them being transported by their rulers to neighbouring land to perpetrate acts of inhumanity which will brand their name with a lasting stain in the history of man.”

Subhas Chandra Bose too faced conflicting considerations in forming his view of Japan of that time, and the fact that he did decide eventually to get the help of the Japanese in raising his Indian National Army would not have eliminated the conflict of rival considerations in Bose’s own assessment. The fact that a person facing a conflict decides to give priority, ultimately, to one argument against an opposing one does not indicate that the opposing argument was without merit, or that the winning argument was the only one that the person saw as important. Since this way of understanding the outcomes of arguments is rather central to the approach of my book *The Argumentative Indian*, I have had the opportunity to discuss the issue more fully there. Netaji clearly did see the conflicting considerations that would have been relevant for his choice, and in the particular circumstances of India and his own role in helping its independence, gave priority to the argument that took him to the I.N.A., rather than doing nothing or ending up again in British imprisonment.

The generally conflicting picture of nationalism is indeed clear enough, which is the subject matter of this lecture. Nationalism is surely a boon in many contexts, and yet it can also be a terrible curse in other ways. The brutal use of nationalism in the World War of 1914-18 was a decisive event in warning people across the world of the destructive potentials of the appeal to nationalism, when the Germans, the British and the French fought each other with great brutality, fed by the invocation of their respective nationalist identities and commitments.

“All a poet can do today is warn,” wrote Wilfred Owen, who told the world of the sadness of human lives caught in violent pursuit of what they took to be their national interest. The tragedy of violence is made even more unbearable by its glorification, which is used so effectively by those who appealed to nationalism, particularly in recruiting foot soldiers for savagery. In his bitterly visionary poem, “Dulce et Decorum est,” Owen appealed to reason and humanity to resist Horace’s much invoked endorsement of the honour of death for (or allegedly for) one’s country:

My friend, you will not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: Dulce et Decorum est
Pro Patria Mori."
Wilfred Owen’s mother, Susan, wrote to Rabindranath Tagore in 1920, describing her son’s final departure for the war that would eventually cost him his life. Through the nastiness of the desolation of war, young Wilfred could still see the beauty of nature and civilization. He went to war “looking towards the sun-gloriﬁed sea – looking towards France.” Susan Owen told Rabindranath that Wilfred said good-bye with “those wonderful words of yours – beginning at ‘When I go from hence, let this be my parting word’.” When the pocket book of her dead son, recovered in the battlefield, was sent to Susan Owen, she found (she wrote to Tagore) “these words written in his dear writing – with your name beneath.” Wilfred Owen’s warning has as much contemporary relevance right now as it had when he himself was facing the horrors of the First World War which would ultimately take his life.

If one of the curses of nationalism is the violence and brutality it could generate, there are other burdens as well. Nationalism can blind one’s vision about other societies, and this can play a terrible part especially when one country is unusually powerful vis-à-vis another. To illustrate the point, let me consider the Irish famines of the 1840s. I know of no other famine in the world in which the proportion of people killed was as large as in those Irish famines. Even the Chinese famine of 1958–61, which is the largest in terms of the size of absolute mortality (with statistical estimates ranging between 23 and 30 million deaths), cannot match the Irish famines in terms of the proportion of the population that was killed. The famines of the 1840s also changed the nature of Ireland in a decisive way. It led to a level of emigration - even under the most terrible conditions of voyage – that has hardly been seen anywhere else in the world. The Irish population even today is very substantially smaller than it was more than 160 years ago, in 1845, when the famine began.

Was British – more particularly English – nationalism involved in the process that led to that sequence of famines in Ireland and to the lack of determined public intervention by the administrators in London who were in charge of Irish governance? That hypothesis has often been advanced in a crude form, and even though the over-simple accusation of motivated genocide could not be defended, the general thesis of the culpable role of English nationalism is not entirely mistaken. In Bernard Shaw’s Man and Superman, Mr. Malone, a rich Irish American, refuses to describe the Irish famines of the 1840s as famines at all. He tells his English daughter-in-law, Violet, that his father “died of starvation in the black 47.” When Violet asks, “The famine?”, Malone replies: “No, the starvation. When a country is full of food and exporting it, there can be no famine.”

There is a signiﬁcant issue here, even though there are several mistakes in Malone’s spiked statement. It is certainly true that food was being exported from famished Ireland to prosperous England, but it is not true that Ireland was full of food. The economic crisis, partly connected with potato blights did reduce sharply the supply of staple food in Ireland, while also stripping most of the Irish of their normal purchasing power, which is why ship after ship sailed down the river Shannon, laden with fine foods such as dairy products, poultry and meat, for which there were more buyers with adequate purchasing power in Britain than in Ireland (such food export out of a famine-stricken region, guided by market demands, can also be observed elsewhere in a particular class of famines, as I have discussed in my book Poverty and Famines). Also, while the expressions “starve” and “starvation” can certainly be taken in their old, pro-active sense - now largely defunct - of making people go without food through intervention, in particular causing their death from hunger, it is hard to deny that there was indeed a famine (as the term is commonly understood) in Ireland at that time, despite Malone’s rhetoric to the contrary.
Malone was, in fact, really making a different – and extremely important – point, in Shaw’s wonderful play, but admittedly with some literary license. The important focal issue concerns the role of human agency in causing and sustaining famines. If the Irish famines were entirely preventable, and in particular, if those in public authority could have prevented them, then the charge of “starving” the Irish would have perspicuity enough. The role of public policy in preventing or not preventing famines, and the political, social and cultural influences that determine public policy, connect closely with the priorities of administration, which are, in turn, influenced by attitudes of the administrators. Underlying Malone’s comprehensive censure is an implicit but powerful reference to the attitude of British rulers in London over those ruled in Ireland.

Indeed, as Joel Mokyr, the historian, has noted, “Ireland was considered by Britain as an alien and even hostile nation”.12 This estrangement affected many aspects of Irish-British relations. For one thing, it discouraged British capital investment in Ireland, contributing to its underdevelopment. But most relevantly in the present context, there was an astonishing callousness about famines and suffering in Ireland and the absence of any determined attempt made by London to prevent Irish destitution and starvation.

Richard Ned Lebow has argued that while poverty in Britain was typically attributed to economic change and fluctuations, Irish poverty was viewed in Britain as being caused by laziness, indifference and ineptitude, so that “Britain’s mission” was not seen as one “to alleviate Irish distress but to civilize her people and to lead them to feel and act like human beings”.13 This may be a somewhat exaggerated view, but it is hard to think that famines like those in Ireland in the 1840s would have been at all allowed to occur in Britain by the administrators in London at that time.

In examining the social and cultural influences that shape public policy and that in this case allowed the famines to occur, it is important to appreciate the sense of dissociation and superiority that characterized the prevailing English attitude to the Irish. The roots of the Irish famines extend, in this sense, at least as far back as Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene (published in 1590) and perhaps even earlier. The tendency to blame the victims, plentiful in the Faerie Queene itself, survived through the famines of the 1840s, and the Irish taste for potato was added to the list of the calamities which the natives had, in the English view, largely brought on themselves. Charles Edward Trevelyan, the Head of the Treasury, in London, during the famines, who had a huge role in the making of public policy in Ireland, even took the liberty of speculating: “There is scarcely a woman of the peasant class in the West of Ireland whose culinary art exceeds the boiling of a potato”.14 There, it seems, we see the birth of a putatively great explanation of a famine – people starved because the Irish peasant woman could not cook beyond boiling a potato! You would be relieved to hear that I will not scrutinize this thesis in detail.

This cultural issue is also deeply political in its fuller sense, and cultural nationalism can create a big divide between the ruler and ruled, thereby making a huge difference to the way a dependent nation is governed. British attitude to Ireland, including the deep skepticism of the Irish character as seen by the administrators in London, is matched by other cases of national prejudice that played a substantial part in colonial misgovernance.
Winston Churchill’s famous remark that the Bengal famine of 1943 was caused by the tendency of people there to breed like rabbits belongs to this general tradition of blaming the colonial victim. This had a profound effect in crucially delaying famine relief in that disastrous and easily preventable famine. The demands of cultural nationalism merges well with the asymmetry of power and can have quite devastating effects.

4

If nationalism is both a boon and a curse, then, it might well be asked, what we should see as the “bottom line.” It would be hard to get a bottom line that sorts out neatly the relative importance of boons and curses in this case, and our judgment must depend on the context in which nationalism is being assessed. Perhaps the right bottom line is no more than the divided recognition just stated, along with a pointer to the contextual nature of the overall judgment that should emerge. But this synthetic assessment is somewhat unhelpful as a general statement about the merits of nationalism, if it is not followed by some kind of analysis of when nationalism acts mainly as a boon, and when it is largely a curse. We have to go, I would argue, a bit deeper than the two-part bottom line would state.

I have tried to argue elsewhere, particularly in *Identity and Violence: the Illusion of Destiny*, that many of the puzzling — and indeed tragic — features of social confusion arise from a common tendency of not paying sufficient attention to the fact that any human being belongs to many different groups and thus has many disparate identities, none of which can be taken to be the person’s only — or only relevant — identity. We are all individually involved in various associations and affiliations in different contexts, in our own respective lives, arising from our birth, our background, our social activities, or the company we keep. The same person can, for example, be a British citizen, of Indian origin, a man, a believer in gender equity, a Muslim, a Malayali, a stock broker, a non-vegetarian, an asthmatic, a linguist, a poet, a pianist, an astrologer, and one who believes that Australians do not really play good cricket but win consistently because of excellent luck in the fields. All these identities can exist together, and there is no contradiction in accepting simultaneously one’s membership of each of these disparate groups, some of which are standard while others may be quite eccentric.

The influence of identity on our decisions can be properly seized only after the basic plurality of identities is adequately appreciated and taken on board. Since we do belong to many different groups, we have to decide whether a particular group to which we belong is — or is not — important for us. This task also demands that we weigh the relative importance of these different identities, and also that the exercise of choice of identity has to come to grips, explicitly or by implication, with this necessary valuational issue. I am very aware that my contentions on the inescapable presence of plurality of identities, and the need for us to choose our relative priorities between them, are in conflict with some approaches to social analysis, in particular “communitarian” thinking.

The communitarian approach points to the fact, plausibly enough, that some special identity, in particular one’s community, can be a matter of pure “discovery” — not of choice. The problem arises after it is accepted that there are membership categories — indeed many of them — to which we involuntarily belong and which can be discovered easily enough. From there the communitarian approach, at least in some versions, proceeds to take the identity with one’s community as being automatically the most important part of one’s social being — central to one’s self-discovery. There is surely a huge jump in the reasoning here, since we also discover many other things about ourselves, such as our class, our racial features such as skin colour, our gender, our environment, and so on, and what importance we give to them respectively is for us to decide. We may be sometimes goaded by on-going convention to conform, but at other times we can resist that goading and decide on our priorities in some different way. We could also give some chosen and acquired — rather than discovered — identification the pride of place, such as one’s profession, one’s political affiliation, or one’s intellectual approach (such as being a leader of a working class movement despite coming from a different class, or being a feminist thinker despite being a man). Human beings are not only capable of discovery, but also of critique, assessment and judgment.
There is a similar issue concerning the place of class in Marxian analysis, and some have argued, within that tradition, that the priority of class is automatic and ubiquitous. But is it? It is worth recollecting, in this context, that Karl Marx himself subjected such unique and automatic identification to severe criticism in his *Critique of Gotha Program*, in 1875, which was his last substantial work. Marx criticized the German Workers Party’s proposed plan of action (the “Gotha Program”) on many grounds, among which was his argument against the insistence in that plan to see a worker only in terms of his or her being a worker, “everything else being ignored”:

...unequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only, for instance, in the present case, are regarded *only as workers*, and nothing more is seen in them, everything else being ignored.16

Neither the plurality of one’s identities and affiliations, nor the role of human decisions in relative priorities can be easily ignored.

In the context of multiple identities, the nationality of a person can clearly be very important in many situations. Nationalism takes the form, in one way or another, of giving priority to that identity in some particular contexts. When Mahatma Gandhi or Subhas Chandra Bose expressed the hope that in the political context Indians of all different religions should have reason enough to give priority to their Indianess over their respective religions, the appeal that they made was towards giving conditional priority to the national identity in the specific context of those political decisions. This does not, however, deny the importance of other identities that the person has, including religion and community and language and literature. Indeed, for

Gandhi ji his Hindu beliefs and practices established a hugely important identity in contexts that were primarily religious, rather than political. For Subhas Chandra Bose too, while religion did not have that role, there were non-political identities that were important for him as well, when the issue at hand was not one of national politics, but other things, such as Bengali culture and literature.

The curse of nationalism tends to be associated, I would suggest, with a tendency, when it exists, of giving automatic priority to one’s national identity in all — or nearly all — contexts. Perhaps more modestly it can be argued that when a particular identity is a source of division and engineered violence, as in a war or in terrorism, giving unique priority to that specific identity, denying all others, can be peculiarly flammable and dangerous. Let me illustrate the point with an example involving competing identities involving nationality, on one hand, and religious community, on the other.
When the Germans, the British and the French tore each other apart during 1914-18 in fighting what was, to a large extent, a war of nationalism, they could have taken more note than they did of the identities they shared with each other, including that of religion (all three were, of course, overwhelmingly Christian countries), or that of their common Europeanness (all three were in Europe), not to mention their shared human identity. It is the single-minded prominence given to nationalism (and related to it, the prioritization of perceived national interests and alleged national priorities), ignoring the bonds of Christianity, Europeanness, or humanity, that made the recruiting of foot soldiers for that nationalistic war a relatively easy job. That was, however, a moment when the combating populations could have fruitfully reflected on their common Europeanness, or their shared religion, which would have worked against giving singular priority to national divisions, even though Europeanness and Christianity are also divisive in other contexts. The recognition of a shared humanity would, of course, have been more uniting in general in a less contingent way, but in the specific situation of the European wars of 1914-18, even the otherwise divisive identities of religion and regionality could have played a conditionally pacifist role.

We can contrast all this with the situation today, when the battle lines of terrorism and violence often go along divisions according to religious communities, not of nationality. Here a national identity, rather than one of religious community, can have a contingently constructive role. Despite the political error – indeed inanity – of the Iraq war waged by the so-called “Coalition of the Willing” led by the United States, the quest for some kind of order in that troubled post-intervention land could be much easier if Iraqi nationalism, or for that matter Arab nationalism, were an important force. Iraqi nationalism could do something to overcome the existing divisiveness of religion and ethnicity, which split up even the Muslim population of Iraq into Shia, Sunni and Kurdish groups, with some hostilities between them. What was a big curse in Europe during the days of the First World War, to wit nationalism, would be a big boon in post-intervention Iraq, to wit – again – nationalism.

Even though I admire greatly the way post-colonial Britain has, by and large, succeeded in giving cultural freedom to people of different backgrounds and origins who are now resident in the country, it is not easy to avoid misgivings about the official moves in recent years in the United Kingdom towards classifying people by religious categories only, such as “British Muslims,” “British Hindus,” “British Sikhs,” etc, in addition to the old Judeo-Christian Brits. A Bangladeshi Muslim is now mainly described in official categorization as a “British Muslim” – not differentiable from a Moroccan or Pakistani or Malaysian Muslim – even though language and literature are hugely important for the identities of most Bangladeshis (and they did even fight a war for separation, not on grounds of religion, but on that of language and culture and secular politics).

This classificatory confinement has been combined in Britain in recent years with extending state-supported, faith-based schools. Rather than reducing the existing state-financed faith-based schools (which are mostly Christian), actually adding others to them – Muslim schools, Hindu schools and Sikh schools to pre-existing Christian ones – sharply enhances the importance of religious identities, and reduces the help that children get from their schooling about how to make reasoned choices, including about beliefs and faiths. Also, not only do many of these schools have difficulty in maintaining standards of non-religious education (like maths and grammar and speech), but also they typically fail to acquaint students with the necessity of reasoning and choice in human life, including their need to decide for themselves how the various components of their identities (related respectively to nationality, language, literature, religious and cultural history, scientific interests, etc.) should receive attention. They tend to give pre-determined priority mainly to loyalty to inherited religious communities, through the construction and composition of these schools and also their chosen curriculum.

The odd view of the British nation as something of a “federation” of religious communities has gained much ground in Britain, not least in official circles. There are indeed many signs of enhanced political divisiveness in contemporary Britain, fostered and nurtured along religious or communal lines.
This is a context very similar to the one in India that Netaji talked about in his Haripur Presidential Address, and indeed elsewhere. It is sad that Britain, which was often accused of nurturing communal divisiveness in India for the purpose of continuing the Raj, now has done a fair amount to promote divisiveness within Britain itself, along similar lines. The cultivation of a British national identity that is not parasitic on identities of religious communities, can be very important at this time, for reasons that Netaji talked about in the context of India, as did Mahatma Gandhi particularly in his presentations in the so-called “Indian Roundtable Conference” in London, hosted by the British Prime Minister in 1931.17

I must conclude here. Nationalism is both a curse and a boon. I have discussed the distinct ways in which the two different types of effects of nationalism may work. Our national identity is one of the many identities that we have, and nationalism operates mainly through giving special priority to our national identity over other demands on our affiliative attention. Nationalism would tend to be least productive – indeed thoroughly counterproductive – when the main confrontations are along the lines of national divisions themselves (as was the case in Europe during the First World War), since greater nationalism would add fuel to fire. On the other hand, nationalism can be productive enough in many contexts, especially when the social divisions and hostilities, within a country or across the world, tend to be based on other identities, such as religion or community or ethnicity (as it is, to a great extent, right now). The curse and the boon are, in this sense, two sides of the same coin, and depending on the circumstances involved, they can have strongly negative or hugely positive effects.

We have reason to resist the tendency, common in some circles, of seeing nationalism as an unmitigated evil, and also the tendency, prevalent in other circles, of considering nationalism to be a universal virtue. More affirmatively, I have argued, first, that nationalism, can be either a boon or a curse, depending on the actual circumstances. Second, I have also argued that central to understanding the contingent variability of the role of nationalism is the need to see nationality as one identity among many that we all have, on the relative importance of which we have to decide, if only implicitly. Third, if the choice of priorities is to be made through reasoning, for which I have also argued, then we have to examine whether an emphasis
on national identity would add to the divisiveness of a country or the world, or help to reduce it by providing an alternative way of understanding human beings, different from other distinctions, for example of religious community or ethnicity, that might be contributing to divisions and possibly violence. The contingency here involves examining whether focusing on national divisions would sharpen hostilities, or alleviate them.

We do know something about the circumstances that would make nationalism a terrible curse, and also about other circumstances that would make it a great boon. There is no mystery in the variability and contingency of the effects of nationalism. But there certainly is a firm invitation here to think and reason, before we decide what to do.

NOTES:

1 “India Shall Be Free” in The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, eds. Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose (Kolkata: Netaji Research Bureau, and Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).


3 The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, p 199.

4 The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, p 200.

5 Tagore, Nationalism, pp. 17-8.


8 The Argumentative Indian (London and Delhi: Penguin, 2005).

9 The poem is included in a collection of poetry for the charitable organization CRY (this particular one was selected by Shashi Tharoor), and in the Foreword to the book (Poems for CRY, Penguin, 2006, I have discussed its lasting relevance.


17 I discussed Gandhiji’s arguments in Identity and Violence, Chapter 8.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to deliver to you today the Netaji Oration. I am deeply grateful and warmly thank Mrs Krishna Bose, Professor Sugata Bose and the Netaji Research Bureau for their warm hospitality and generosity.

The occasion has both personal and wider, historical meaning for me. In the first place, this visit brings me back to India after an absence of some years. Intellectually at least, I return not so much from the West as from the Southeast, and I am delighted to be here with my friend and colleague Tim Harper. The two books that we have written as co-authors, Forgotten Armies and Forgotten Wars, have taught me a great deal about Southeast Asia and the Indian role there, not least about Subhas Bose and the Indian National Army. Tim’s engagement with the people of Malaysia and Singapore-Malay, Chinese and Indian- and his determination to bring their voices to the fore in historical writing has been an inspiration. This is especially so since it is a weakness in older academics such as me to pontificate more and more globally on the basis of less and less detailed historical research and argument.

Then again, speaking today about Subhas Bose, his Burmese alter ego, Aung San, and the end of colonialism in South and Southeast Asia reminds me personally of two other points. Firstly, Subhas Bose was a Cambridge man. When he was up at the University in 1919 and 1920, he was never free from the surveillance of suspicious colonial officials and the Special Branch. He did record, however, that ‘students here have a status- and the way the professors treat them is different. One can see how man should treat his fellow man. They have many faults, but in many matters you have to respect them for their virtues.’ The contrast with the barely concealed racist contempt of the colonial educational establishment in India was clear to him. Let us hope that mutual respect of this sort between teachers and students can be maintained through the numerous and sometimes destructive changes that are taking place in the higher educational system of our two countries.

Secondly, I speak as an Englishman nearly sixty years, or by common reckoning, two generations, after the independence of India which Subhas Bose fought for throughout his life. There can be no sense in which memories of that past age of 1939 to 1955 can ever be entirely stilled. Moral judgements will continue to be made in India, Britain, China, and across the world, about responsibility for the momentous events of those years: the 1943 Bengal famine, the Japanese atrocities in Southeast Asia, Netaji’s own cooperation with the Axis powers or the Allied dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Nerves are raw and will remain so. I can remember quite vividly the argument in 1990 when I helped stage an exhibition in the National Portrait Gallery, London, called ‘The Raj: India and the British, 1600-1947.’ One of the less stellar Indian academics, now working in the USA, denounced the exhibition as ‘orientalist’, while some British ex-servicemen denounced me as unpatriotic because I had dared to show, as one of the last exhibits,
a fine portrait of Subhas Bose, which had been borrowed from the Victoria Memorial Gallery. Indeed, I fear that my father’s generation would still not have understood how I could I stand here today. Debate and disagreement of this sort will continue. Indeed, the conflicts of today’s world might well bring them even more to the fore. At a superficial level, the facile argument between proponents of today’s American ‘empire’, notably Niall Ferguson, and fierce critics of this position will continue to bring the morality of ‘imperialism’ into public debate. At the same time, historians and thoughtful members of the general public might well see parallels between today’s Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and the events at the end of the Second World War: the British re-occupations of Burma, Southern Vietnam and Indonesia in 1945 and the rapid deterioration of conditions there in the face of the determined resistance of guerrilla armies. They might see parallels, too, in the failure of the Allied ‘victor’s justice’ meted out to the apparently defeated in Afghanistan and Iraq and the collapse of the British attempts to prosecute the INA and Aung San in the years 1945-7.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that in 2007 reasonable people can assess the events of the 1940s from a position of much greater objectivity than was possible even twenty years ago. For one, the balance of power between the West and Asia has changed out of all recognition. Today we are standing at the beginning of the Asian century. India and China are the world’s two fastest growing economies, the one emerging as a new centre of intelligent service industries, the other as an industrial giant. Their rise was foreshadowed in the 1970s and ‘80s by rapid economic growth in Japan and in the city-state of Singapore. Then, in the 1990s Singapore’s entrepreneurial dynamism spilled over into other parts of Southeast Asia, notably adjoining Malaysia and Thailand. Even two parts of the region that seemed for long to have been excluded by different ideologies from the fruits of development, Burma and Vietnam, now benefit to some extent from Chinese wealth and economic liberalisation respectively. New universities, gaudy new office blocs and residential apartments, golf links and racecourses, hotels and sports arenas, are springing up across the whole region. Almost every ear in even the remotest village seems pinned to a mobile phone. There is a palpable sense of optimism and confidence in the future abroad.

The contrast between the new South and Southeast Asia and the same region a mere six decades ago is stark. Then, in the 1940s, it was sandwiched between China and India in the throes of communal violence, famine and civil war. Southeast Asia itself had suffered terribly from a pitiless Japanese invasion and the ruthlessness of the returning Allied armies. In 1942 young nationalists in the region had hoped that independence from the colonial powers—Britain, France and Holland—would immediately follow the Japanese coup. By the next year, those hopes had largely been disappointed. The Japanese cry of ‘Asia for the Asians’ merely covered their own imperial ambitions. Chinese civilians had been massacred in large numbers in Malaya while a Communist-led insurgency began to take form in the jungles of the interior of the peninsula. In Burma and Thailand the quasi-independence given by the Japanese did little to assuage a population falling daily further into poverty and increasingly brutalised by labour recruiters and the Japanese secret police. In the hills of the north and east, tribal levies working with British special operations officers registered significant successes against the Japanese, but often at a terrible cost to local villagers who were punished for helping them.

As the war came to its terrible end at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, even the hopes of independence cherished by those young nationalists in the region seemed a mere mirage. British armies had already entered Rangoon and apparently re-established control over their old colony. In the autumn of that year they recaptured Malaya. The whole crescent of land that the British had held for a century or more between Calcutta and Singapore seemed to have fallen to them again in a Second Colonial Occupation. British and Indian firms that the Burmese believed had exploited them were on the point of returning along
with the discredited colonial government. In Malaya, where radicals had been on the point of declaring independence in August British rule, now a military administration turning corrupt, seemed if anything stronger than it had been in 1939. In fact, this was the first time the crescent of land seemed under something like a uniform colonial administration where previously it had been split into dozens of different administrative fiefdoms and varieties of ‘princely states’ under British tutelage.

Even in India, it was by no means that the British had the will to grant immediate independence. Churchill and the Tories wanted at the very least to hive off Pakistan and ‘Princetan’ into a new British Empire, whatever happened to a rump India. The new Labour government continued to believe in white tutelage of non-European peoples. It was precisely at this point- on the fulcrum of the Second Colonial Occupation of 1945 -that two nationalist armies the Burma Independence Army, as it was initially called, and the Indian National Army- came into their own. The Indian National Army was apparently a defeated force, rolled up alongside the Japanese, by the returning British forces. Its leader Subhas Bose, was reported dead in a plane crash in Taiwan. In fact, the INA’s political significance and Bose’s heritage had never been more powerful. The INA was to prove a decisive force in the rapid, if tragically bloody decolonisation of the Subcontinent. Similarly, the BIA forces, having recently switched from the Japanese to the Allied side, seemed in August 1945, hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned by the returning British Fourteenth Army. Their young leader, Aung San, was despised by many of the British officials and soldiers who participated in the reoccupation, oblivious of the massive changes that had overtaken Burmese politics since the Japanese invasion of 1942. But here again, the military and moral force embodied in Aung San and the Burmese Independence Army had created an irresistible momentum towards independence that the British were rapidly forced to acknowledge.

My lecture today is conceived as reflection on the comparisons, connections and differences between Aung San and Subhas Bose, between the Indian National Army and the Burmese Independence Army, between India on the verge of freedom and its Southeast Asian neighbour. I will devote much of my time to analysing events in Burma between 1945 and 1948. This is partly because the INA story is so well known, especially to this audience. But it is also because I want to stress the interconnections between the national liberation movements in South, Southeast and indeed East Asia during this period, and the way that the crisis interlocked in the minds of British policy-makers, too. Finally, through this comparison, I want to make a point to my colleagues in the Indian historical profession. Through social history, postcolonial and Subaltern Studies, Indian historians, based at least partly in India itself, have already made a great contribution to the development of theory and argument in the historical profession as a whole. This stands in marked contrast to the situation in East Asia, where Japanese historiography remains quite introverted and novel and challenging Chinese history is still written mainly by Americans or Chinese Americans. Indians have seized hold of their historical writing in quite a remarkable way since I started in the profession in the 1960s. Yet there is still much to do in order fully to use the massive archival and library resources in this country. These resources throw light on the history of India’s neighbours, as well as India itself. Indian historians are well placed not only to contribute to the writing of the history of East and Southeast Asia, but the Middle East and East Africa, too. Works such as Professor Bose’s A Hundred Horizons, a study of the Indian Ocean in the widest sense, have already begun this task, and others are charting the impact of the Indian army and Indian administration in Iraq and Iran after the turn of the twentieth century, for instance. But my vision is of an interconnected Asian history as robust and self-aware as European history has been since the work of Marc Bloch. India could well become the type of historiographical laboratory for Asia that France has been for Europe since the 1930s. So let me now venture into some comparisons and connections.

On the face of it there were many stark differences between Subhas Bose and Aung San. Bose was twenty years older than the Burmese leader who was a mere student activist before the outbreak of the Second World War. The Boses’ family was an old and distinguished literary and administrative family, thoroughly versed in English and other European languages. By contrast, Aung San was the son of a relatively obscure lawyer in Magwe district south of Mandalay. He went to a local school before joining Rangoon University, which itself was still a distant province of Calcutta University as late as 1936. Anelene Naw, Aung San’s most recent biographer notes that he was quite unsophisticated.
He was booed in the University Student’s Union because of his poor English and tried to compensate for this by learning by heart huge chunks of the speeches of Edmund Burke. By comparison with the nearly a century of nationalist political activity in Bengal, Burmese nationalism was a late-comer, which scarcely registered on the international stage until the peasant revolts and student demonstrations of the depression era of the 1930s alerted the colonial authorities to what they saw as a new menace.

On the other hand Subhas Bose and his colleagues in the Forward Bloc had much in common with the Thakins, as the young Burmese nationalists called themselves. Burma had been part of the Indian Empire until 1936 and numerous political and social links had been created, especially between Bengali nationalist circles and those in Burma with its large Indian immigrant population. Aung San himself had travelled around India and addressed political meetings in Calcutta and Delhi immediately before the war, as had Thakin Nu, one of his closest companions. The more radical leaders in both territories believed that the measures of local self-government conceded in the 1935 Government of India Act had merely entrenched the power of self-serving landlord elites which would tamely submit to the colonial power. The great student demonstrations around Rangoon’s Shwedagon Pagoda in 1936 and 1937 were animated by similar anger as the movement against the Holwell Monument in Calcutta which Subhas Bose orchestrated three years later and led to his fateful imprisonment in the Presidency Jail in this city. Most of all, in their different generations, Bose and Aung San had suffered from the racism of British administration and had both withdrawn from the careers in the Indian Civil Service for which they had once been destined.

In due course, by the summer of 1943, both Subhas Bose and Aung San found themselves in military uniform on Burmese soil, ready to participate in the great Japanese advance on the British forces in India. Bose, as you all know, had fled to Germany, but seeing the Asian War as the key sector for the promotion of Indian independence, had made his way through Singapore to Burma and taken command of the Indian National Army. Aung San, by contrast, had been on the run from the British authorities since 1939 and had been recruited by the Japanese agent, Col. Suzuki, to lead what was then called the Burma Independence Army. He and his Thirty Comrades had been trained by the Japanese on the island of Hainan and entered Burma at the start of 1942 with the victorious Japanese forces that thrust north from Rangoon to the very borders of Bengal. Over the next three years both Aung San and Subhas Bose fought a series of hard campaigns against the British on the Burma front that effectively came to an end only with the defeat of the INA at Mount Popa in March 1945 and the rebellion of the BIA against the Japanese in the same month.

It is this period in the lives of these two leaders – Netaji and Bogvoyke, or ‘the General’, as Aung San was known- that has confirmed their reputation as militarists, and to that generation of Allied leaders, and many afterwards, as ‘fascists.’ I believe, however, that this judgement is wrong in the case of both men. Whatever view one takes of their tactical alliance with the Axis leaders, neither had any instinctive sympathy with fascism. Aung San’s original plan as he fled the British in 1940 was to enlist the help of the Chinese Communists against the colonialists; only circumstances, not ideology, forced him into the hands of the Japanese. During the later 1930s, Aung San, Thakin Nu and others of the Thirty Comrades had espoused broadly leftist positions on economic policy and had written or spoken against the Japanese wars of extermination against the Chinese nationalists. It is true that in 1941, under training by the Japanese, Aung San had written ‘Blueprint for Burma’. This pamphlet spoke of the supremacy of the state and adopted the eugenicist’s language of ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ peoples: all the trappings of quasi-fascism, in fact. But this piece was probably designed for circulation within the Japanese Army only and it may well have been Aung San’s enemies who published it for a wider audience in 1946.¹ On his first visit to Tokyo in 1940, he professed unease with the displays of right wing, monarchical nationalism he saw in the Japanese capital. During the war, he continually bridled at Prime Minister Ba Maw’s compromises with the Japanese command, pushing for greater independence, rather than the ‘sham’ independence he believed the Japanese had conceded in 1943. Judging by his actions during the war and his speeches and writings afterwards, he was a kind of populist democrat, a non-doctrinaire socialist,
who believed in ‘one man one vote’, but only insofar as it delivered a government in the people’s interest. Such a proviso perhaps left room for political intervention by strongmen. Later military dictators, notably Ne Win, exploited this aspect of Aung San’s legacy. Yet, on the whole, Aung San seems to have had a higher regard for democratic values than many contemporary political leaders in Southeast Asia.

All this, of course, is reminiscent of Subhas Bose. Before 1940 Bose could best be categorised as a left nationalist in the tradition of the swadeshi movement of the pre-first war period. At Cambridge, we find him writing of the need for labour to control capital and the imperative of setting up cooperative banks among the peasantry and spreading education by state intervention. He lauded the ancient Indian institution of the panchayat and argued that the British had snuffed out local self government in India.2 By the mid-1930s, his view of the Japanese role on the Asian mainland was as ambivalent as that Aung San’s. As Leonard Gordon has reminded us, he admired the Japanese for their rejection of western tutelage and their hostility to the British Empire. Yet he also deplored Japan’s aggressive and militaristic policy in China. Bose asked why Japan’s renaissance could not have been achieved ‘without Imperialism, without dismembering the Chinese republic, without humiliating another proud, cultured and ancient race?’3

When he was not in British prisons, Bose had spent much time in Europe during the 1930s, meeting opponents of British policy. He visited Eamon de Valera and the radical Irish nationalists. He professed some admiration for Mussolini and had met Nazi leaders, though he expressed many reservations about Hitler’s regime, in particular. This, however, was no different from the stance adopted by Gandhi, and indeed by much of the British establishment and ironically by Churchill himself before about 1933.

In Indian, domestic politics Subhas Bose constantly advocated a general franchise and peasant uplift, allying with men such as the Kisan leader, Sahajanand, and not with Hindu ideologues such as V. D.Savarkar or the rightist Maharashtrian leadership. His aim was to cement an alliance of ‘leftists’ which would, through a ‘dialectical process’, revive the democratic character of the Congress and interdict all concession to imperialism. The main reason that he was prepared to consider a tactical alliance with Hitler was that Nazi Germany was in alliance with ‘the greatest leftist force in the world’, the Soviet Union.4

During the war in Burma and Singapore Subhas Bose rigorously maintained the democratic principles of the Indian Independence League and refused to allow his Azad Hind Government to be annexed to the ideological aims and rhetoric of the Axis. This marked him out from Ba Maw, for instance, who constantly fell back on the rhetoric of racial conflict in his wartime speeches.

Particularly significant for the future was the attitude of both Aung San and Subhas Bose’s to women and minorities. Bose spoke and wrote frequently from the 1910s of the need to bring women into politics and into public life, as did Aung San. As much a Bengali patriot as an Indian nationalist, Bose made numerous approaches to the more radical Muslim leaders of the province, following the policies of C. R.Das. He was hostile to the Muslim League because it represented landowners and hangers-on of British rule, not because it was Muslim. His religious ideology seems to have been free thinking in the Brahma or perhaps Ramakrishna tradition and again in no way, comparable with that of the Hindu Mahasabha. The inclusive nature of Subhas Bose’s philosophy of the state was reflected in the constitution of the INA and the Azad Hind government. His promotion of Hindustani or Urdu as the national language of the government-in-exile was much more than a concession to the large numbers of Muslim soldiers who had joined the INA’s ranks. Bose was hostile to the Federal constitution proposed by the British because he believed that it would fracture the ancient unity of the country. But nor did he believe in overweening centralisation. He espoused a model of an ‘India of the homelands’, similar perhaps to that espoused by his early role model Aurobindo Ghose, and very far from the concept of the unitary, hard-edged nation state adopted on both the far right and the far left.
This position, again, was remarkably similar to Aung San’s. The Burmese leader was a free thinker and a believer in the rationality of Buddhist ethics, rather than a ‘Protestant’ Buddhist revivalist like so many of his generation in Burma, Japan and Sri Lanka. Unlike his friend and follower, Thakin Nu, he had no desire to make Buddhism Burma’s state religion, feeling that this would alienate the Christian and Muslim minorities who had, even in the 1930s, shown themselves worried about Buddhist ‘domination.’ Even before he left for London for the momentous conference of January 1947, which would free Burma, Aung San had been talking of a Burma that would be ‘a federation of all the races and the frontier areas’. He spoke of local governments in minority areas with their own financial competence. He was generally much more conciliatory on these issues than were the languishing parties of the right. In 1945 and ’46, he seems to have understood instinctively that serious civil strife was only months away unless he worked hard to keep the minorities on board.

Apart from his great personal prestige, Aung San was critical in these negotiations because he had old links with the minorities, the Karens in particular. Not all Karens had identified with the British cause during the War and some of their leaders in the Irrawaddy Delta had come to meet Aung San in 1943 in the hope of reaching an accommodation and putting behind them the massacres of minority people which had attended the Japanese invasion of 1942. A Karen unit had fought in the Burma Defence Army and further negotiations had taken place in 1945 at the time of its revolt against the Japanese. Shortly before his trip to London in 1947 Aung San had visited the pretty Karen Christian village of Kappali, where the Bishop of Rangoon had once lived, and soon after his return he visited the Shan states.5

Indeed, Aung San was more prepared than most Burmese leaders to accept the cultural and political differences upon which the minorities insisted. He seems to have been genuinely concerned that the hill peoples got a democratic form of government. He was prepared to concede a large degree of autonomy to them, provided figures such as the petty rulers, the sawbwas, and corrupt tribal headmen were removed from the scene. In one of his speeches just after the war, Aung San recalled that a Karen soldier had once told him that the Karen and the Burmese were exactly the same under the skin. The only difference was that the Burmese preferred to play cards during their periods of leave, while the Karens would go off on fishing expeditions.

It is surely the inclusive and basically democratic reputations of Subhas Bose and Aung San which appealed to the wider Indian and Burmese people in 1945-7 when the INA and the BDA were apparently defeated or marginalised. During the War the BDA had expanded from a small force representing mainly southerners to a truly national army, loved by the people who believed that their pride as a nation was being restored after being effectively excluded from Burma’s armed forces since 1886. Aung San was unable to establish the immediate provisional government in Rangoon which they had planned before their revolt against the Japanese in March 1945. But their stubborn fighting and obvious popularity impressed the more open-minded British leaders, such as Lord Louis Mountbatten and General William Slim. Four thousand members of the BDA were to be included in the new British-controlled Burma Forces and Aung San retired from military command to democratic politics, pushing for an immediate election under a genuine popular franchise. This was critical. For it allowed the Thankins to re-establish themselves in Burmese politics before the British old guard, led by the governor Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith returned to the country and began to consider legal proceedings against Aung San similar to the ones they had already initiated against the INA.

It was, indeed, the failure of the British authorities to prosecute members of the INA either for rebellion against the King-Emperor or even for supposed brutality against their own troops that signalled the end of British rule in the Subcontinent, and by one remove, Burma. The auguries were already clear as early as December 1945 when the first prosecutions of INA officers in the Red Fort of Delhi failed to reach the conclusion the British had desired. The most telling arguments, though, were those that brought international law into the scales. The British, the defence argued, had abandoned their status as a government in Malaya and Burma. Four years before in Singapore, as the garrison surrendered, Colonel Hunt had told captured Indian troops that they should ‘obey the orders of the Japanese in the way that you obeyed the British government. Otherwise you will be punished.’6
Other evidence seemed to suggest that the Singapore commander, General Percival, had endorsed this position. So, said the accused, P.K. Sehgal: ‘In return for the loyalty of the Indians, the British representative, handed them over to the Japanese like a flock of sheep. Thereby the British had cut off all our bonds of allegiance to the British Crown.’ Buoyed up by the public reaction to this claim, the defence went on to argue that Bose’s Azad Hind (Free India) government was an independent government created by war. It controlled its own territories, even if they were only the sparsely populated Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It had an effective and autonomous army, and its government had been recognized by, among others, the government of Eire.

The Azad Hind government enjoyed exactly the same status as the United States of America after the declaration of independence in 1776. The fact that Subhas Bose had failed militarily was neither here nor there. The INA soldiers were officers of an independent army. Any floggings and executions they administered in Burma and Malaya were perfectly compatible with the British Army Act of 1911.

What was striking about this line of argument was that it had been put together not solely by the three determined Congressmen amongst the defence lawyers, Nehru, Bhulabhai Desai and Asaf Ali, but by several hoary old Indian liberals who had been decorated by the British government and were widely regarded as loyalists by both British and Indians. If such men were arguing that the independent Indian nation already existed, how could it be otherwise? The three young officers were ultimately convicted, but only of the lesser charge of rebellion against the king emperor. The sentences passed were never carried out. Even Wavell, the Viceroy, later acknowledged that the first trials should have been of men who could actually be convicted of brutality or murder.

The three were later released from jail and given dishonourable discharges from the army. But the British Raj had already suffered a lethal blow. Its legitimacy, long questioned, was now seeping away. Even Ajit Rudra, a senior Indian officer who had once believed passionately that the INA had betrayed their loyalty to the king emperor, had second thoughts. If the British had knowingly released the Indian troops from their allegiance, how could they be classed as traitors? Hereafter, the Congress moved forward on a head of wind that the British could not resist, on through the 1946 elections, to virtual power in the provisional government of the autumn of that year and on to Independence. The effect on soldiers and civilians up and down the crescent was electrifying. In Burma there never had been a question of treating the BNA in the same manner as the INA, except among the most intransigent old British civil servants. If the INA were not really guilty of rebellion, Burmese thought, the BIA must surely be the legitimate military wing of their national movement. More significantly, the British authorities already knew by the early months of 1946 that they could no longer use the Indian Army to suppress nationalist rebellions in other parts of southern Asia. Indian troops despatched to fight the Viet Minh in southern Indochina had already shown signs of disaffection, as had those mired in heavy British fighting against the Indonesian revolution. Yet to disaffection and fatigue was now added the widespread sentiment that the very legitimacy of British military law had collapsed in the face of legal as well as popular opposition.

The story of Burma’s acceleration towards independence has yet to achieve similar clarity as India’s, even though the two countries’ fates were so closely inter-connected. What changed the British mindset that even as late as April 1946 seemed disinclined to accept independence as an option even within five years? Two incidents in the first half of 1946 provide the answer, I think. First, was the governor Dorman-Smith’s failure to prosecute Aung San, the leader of the Burmese Patriotic forces for a murder, or according to Burmese, an execution, he had committed during the British retreat of 1942. This was to stand as a parallel with the failure of the Red Fort trials in India. The dead headman, one Abdul Rauf, was an Indian Muslim, so the issue had significance beyond its status as a nationalist clarion call for the Burmese.
At the last minute, The British government forced the governor to climb down and abandon the attempt to prosecute Burma’s military hero. There were two reasons for this, both concerning regional connections. Firstly, its effect in India would have been disastrous. Not only did Mountbatten, still C in CSEA ask Attlee to intervene against Dorman-Smith. But two members of the British government, Cripps and Pethick-Lawrence, telegraphed Burma urgently from Delhi in April 1946, where they were on Cabinet Mission duty. They were trying to resolve the increasingly intractable stand-off between the Congress and Muslim League over the structure of a future government of independent India. The Indian issue thrust Burma to the margins. ‘Solely from the point of view of our mission here, we must repeat to you the great risks we see in the arrest of Aung San at this juncture.’

It would be a ‘disastrous’ move and would derail the whole Indian constitutional process. To a long private letter to Attlee about the Indian deadlock, Pethick-Lawrence added a postscript on the possible arrest of Aung San: ‘my personal feeling is that if we start probing into what happened during the Japanese occupation, we shall stir up mud which may well give us a lot of trouble.’

The trouble was already palpable. There were in Burma at this time perhaps 120,000 para-military volunteering organisations. These were made up of Burmese patriotic forces, the former BIA, which had not been assimilated into the reconstituted British Burmese Army. They were fiercely loyal to Aung San and many had secreted weapons that they had procured from the defeated Japanese. Effectively, the British had never regained control over the Burmese countryside and only the Indian Army could have helped them to do so in the conditions of ‘imperial overstretch’ which had prevailed since the end of the war. The Indian authorities, however, had made it clear since the provincial elections of 1946 that Indian troops could now not be used to put down Burmese nationalists, and this was the second point. Congress would not wear it.

Shortly after this a second major incident occurred to expose the hollowness of British rule. This was a shooting in the town of Tantabin in the Insein District. The police discharged at least sixty live rounds into a crowd of demonstrators and local volunteers, killing five people and wounding many others before the crowd retreated. Three hundred volunteers were arrested, but it was never clear if the order to disperse was actually given or understood by the crowd before the firing began. As in so many incidents from British imperial history, from Ireland through Egypt to Amritsar in India in 1919, and beyond, a bloody police action galvanized people’s perception of British rule as irredeemably repressive. For the British, an ominous feature of the situation in Tantabin was that the crowd was composed of villagers, not students or ‘agitators’. They were protesting because of demands for the repayment of agricultural loans in a terrible season of shortage and hardship. Tantabin was an indication of the strength of the bonds that had been forged between the yeabaws, the volunteer corps of the BIA, and the villages in 1942. It was a premonition of a major revolt, comparable on a small scale to the 1942 Quit India movement.

In the short run Tantabin was important because it finally caused Attlee’s government to recall Dorman-Smith. The governor was eventually replaced by Hubert Rance, a former deputy of Mountbatten in the military administration and like his old commander much more favourable to Asian nationalists. In the longer run, however, Tantabin was regarded as a straw-in-the-wind, a reminder that large-scale peasant revolt was quite possible. This was the fear that pushed Governor Rance in the autumn of 1946 to argue for a constitutional conference in London and the immediate announcement of a date for Burmese independence in early 1948. The new governor was faced in September and October with a rash of industrial strikes, major demonstrations in the towns and the clear convergence of village banditry, communist insurgency and peasant grievance. Nationalist leaders from Aung San down were demanding immediate local-self government on the lines of the Indian interim government of September 1946. Prolonged armed conflict might also play into the hands of the insurrectionary elements within the communists’ leadership who had now broken away from the more moderate, ‘socialist’ nationalists under Aung San.
In Burma, as in India, therefore, mid-1946 saw the British government lose control at the local level simultaneously with its loss of control over the Indian Army, the ultimate guarantee of its power in both colonial societies. There was, however, one important difference at the broadest level in the politics of terminal colonialism between India, Burma and also Malaya. That was the issue of the minorities. Estimates still vary as to whether the British were still attempting to divide-and-rule Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in the years 1945-7. What seems certain, though, is that by the end of 1946, the Muslim League had finally gained enough support to convince both the British and the Congress that no settlement was possible without it. In Burma, the British and Christian missions had long supported the separatist pretensions of the Karen population and, to a lesser extent those of the northern and eastern hill peoples: the Kachin, Chin and Shan. Frontier Affairs officers put up a vigorous rearguard action to protect ‘their’ people from assimilation into the majority Burmese state. Rance had to personally discipline one of the most maverick of these, H. Stevenson. During the war the leaderships of these assumed ethnicities had been armed in the anti-Japanese struggle. Yet there was one crucial difference. At the last moment, the British government came down decisively on the side of a unified Burmese state in a way it did not in India. There could no ‘Karennistan’, let alone an unstable frontier zone facing either the Indian or the Chinese border. With Guomindang forces pushing down into the north of Burma and communists taking the offensive that was too dangerous for the British government to contemplate.

The critical point in the London independence negotiations of early 1947, according to Kyaw Nyein, an associate of Aung San, was not so much the fate of British commercial interests in Burma as the status of the hill areas and minorities. At one point Cripps glanced up at the map. He said that if you looked at the hill peoples, Burma seemed to be surrounded by a scythe.14 It was no use getting independence unless these territories and peoples were firmly welded to the new state. With these few words Cripps conceded to Buddhist Burma what three generations of British officials, commercial agents and missionaries had sought to deny it – control over the ethnic minorities. As with the Indian princes, though not the Indian Muslims or for that matter the Malay Muslims, the British simply abandoned their long-term clients in the face of political reality. Ministers had already tacitly agreed that whatever clever jigsaw work might be done, nothing like a Karen state was really viable. A weak and fissiparous Burma would be dangerously exposed to Chinese incursions from the north and even to communal instability in neighbouring India.

The incorporation of the hill areas and minorities would be a tricky problem, however. Both sides agreed that there should be a conference with their leaders at the hill town of Panglong once the delegation returned to Burma. The question of British participation in this remained unresolved. Aung San was deeply suspicious of the British Frontier Service officers and Tom Driberg, a radical British Member of Parliament, increased his alarm by saying that even one British government representative at Panglong might encourage the more recalcitrant sawbwas or minority leaders to hold out for too much. In the event, British representatives at Panglong conference held to the Attlee government’s line and a degree of consensus about limited minority local autonomy was conceded. This allowed the Rangoon government and its armed forces to build up a relatively strong position in the minority areas and ensured that opposition to Rangoon from minority leaders would never be unanimous. In the civil war of 1948-50, when armed Karens and communists, drove the Burmese government back on Rangoon, Burma survived as an entity because there was never a consensus among its opponents. This distinguishes the Burmese case from that of India and indeed Malaya where the British definitely benefited from rivalry between Chinese leftist and Malay conservative nationalists. This is not to say that maverick British and Australian soldiers of former special operations forces did not directly aid Karen, Chin and Kachin rebels during the Burmese civil war of 1948-50. They did so, and there is even some evidence that the embittered Dorman-Smith was involved. But the British government itself worked for Burmese unity and the survival of the Rangoon government.
Burma did indeed survive as a more or less unified entity through to the present, but it did so at the cost of its fledgling democratic institutions, in marked contrast to India. There may have been some general and structural reasons for this: the late development of a strong nationalist movement in Burma, compared with India; the form of British administration in the frontier territories; the massive damage inflicted on the country during the War, necessitating a command economy in 1945. But it was the assassination of Aung San in July 1947 that was of critical importance. In the few months between the Panglong Conference and his death, he had worked hard and successfully not to exacerbate the disaffection of the minorities, especially the Karens. He continued to offer them significant degrees of autonomy within the future Union of Burma. If he had lived it is very possible that the Burmese civil war of 1948-53 would not have occurred, or would have been much less vicious. This in turn might have limited the power of the Burmese army, which was already an overmighty force by the mid-1950s. By contrast, the democratic credentials of Subhas and Sarat Bose, along with, it must be said, Nehru’s shrewd understanding of the nature of Indian nationalism, ensured that the military ethos cultivated by the INA during the War had no place in independent and democratic India. The popular politics of the ballot box resumed their well-tried if raucous path after 1945.

Much modern professional history is written in terms of social forces, un-authored discourses or de-humanised ‘globalisation.’ The careers of Subhas Bose and Aung San, as well as the existence of a series of lectures such as this, remind us of the continuing importance of the role of exemplary individuals in history.

Thank you.

NOTES :


3 Cited in Leonard A. Gordon, Brothers against The Raj (New Yourk, 1990)

4 The Forward Bloc. Its justification, 1941’ Bose, Indian Struggle., p. 409.

5 Naw, Aung San, p. 198.

6 Ibid. p. 47.

7 Conference of provincial officers, L/WS/1/1577, OIOC.

8 For instance, Sir Dalip Singh, K.N.Katju and J.N.Sapru, Kulkarni and Munshi, First Indian National Army Trial, p. 171.


10 Palit, Rudra, pp. 282, 284.


12 Pethick-Lawrence to Attlee, 7 April 1946, Pethick-Lawrence papers, 1/72, Trinity College, Cambridge.

13 Ibid., pp. (7)-(12).

14 Ibid.
Sisir Kumar Bose Lecture, 2007
Revolt in Malaya: the Indian Connection
Timothy Norman Harper

Your Excellency Governor of West Bengal, Union Minister, Professor Krishna Bose, Professor Sugata Bose, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman. Like Professor Bayly, my view of these events is from the south-east, and my road to Calcutta, through the two books we have written together, has been a long one. This evening I want to reflect on the legacy of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, not merely to India’s freedom but to that of Southeast Asia. Yet my story, begins in this house. It begins immediately at the end of war when the grounds in which we stand were flooded with refugees, soldiers of the INA drawn to it like a beacon. At that time, Sisir Kumar Bose had recently been released from imprisonment and had taken a lead in the formation of the Azad Hind Ambulance Service to render desperately needed relief to those followers of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose who were stranded far from their homes.

One of these was a young man from Malaya, James Puthucheary: a scholarly-looking young man with glasses. He was born in Johore, a Malay state that had been under British control for two generations. It was a frontier world formed by very recent Indonesian, Chinese and Indian migrants: the classic ‘plural society’. He grew up with many Chinese and Malay friends. It was a political backwater, and James was one of the thousands of men and women in Malaya who had never seen India, but for whom Netaji’s arrival in Malaya was a personal epiphany. Puthucheary enlisted, and fought with the Azad Guerrilla Regiment at Imphal. He was the only member of his platoon to survive the retreat to Mandalay.

At the war’s sudden end he travelled to Rangoon. With the help of Indian RAF personnel, and disguised as an airman, he finally completed his march to Calcutta. With only a few cigarettes, and no money in his pockets, he enlisted the help of a passing motorist and made his way to Elgin Road. He stayed for several months, and threw himself into ex-INA circles, helping them to organise. His time in Calcutta was profoundly formative. He had already been exposed to Marxism by a doctor he met in Burma. But here he sat at the feet of India’s national leaders and educators. He met with the representatives of emerging nations – with the foreign Minister of the new Vietnamese republic. He emerged with an even more fervent belief in Asia’s destiny and as a man of the left.

This was, of course, not an exceptional journey. You all know of Datin Janaki’s own long march with the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. Everywhere people were anxiously on the move, to reach their families, to reach food, and to continue their political struggle. As Professor Bayly has reminded us, the war had drawn together the huge territory from Calcutta to Singapore and beyond into a connected realm of conflict. The very term ‘South East Asia’ was coined to describe this huge Crescent of land. Yet since the immediate post-war years, South and Southeast Asia have too often collapsed into a series of academic specialities. Public memory has also fragmented. Yet this evening, I want to suggest some ways in which, after 1945, at the defining moment of freedom, their struggles remained fused. And I want to explore its legacy.

The first set of connections was forged by fighting itself. What we know as the Second World War may have ended in August 1945, but the Great Asian War was merely ending a new phase. As British power in the sub-continent began to wane, they sought to revive and re-centre their Asian empire on Southeast Asia. If India was the jewel in the British imperial crown, Malaya was the industrial diamond;
its exports made it the ‘dollar arsenal’ of the Sterling Area. Singapore was a more of a ‘fortress’ than ever it was in 1941: a staging post for hundreds of thousands of men in uniform shipping to points further east. This soon deflated any sense of elation that war was now over. For a time in 1945 and early 1946, the whole area from the borders of Bengal and Assam almost as far as the Australian Sea was united for the first and only time in a single, interconnected government. South East Asia Command had become the largest administrative apparatus on Earth. Yet to achieve this, India had to find troops, not only for the reoccupation Burma, Malaya and Singapore. The British had taken responsibility for the empires of others: the French in Indochina and the Dutch in Indonesia. The British even sent detachments of the Indian Army to occupied Japan; the first and the last so-called ‘British Commonwealth’ force of its kind, a contingent 37,000 strong. The troops were given an area that included Hiroshima. It was believed at the time that this was because the Americans did not want to be so close by associated with the devastation of their bomb: they argued that the north was too cold for the Indians and Australians. The effects of radiation were, of course, unknown at this time; and many of the men who served in Hiroshima would die at a comparatively early age. The final Indian soldiers left Japan only on 25 October 1947.

This last outreach of the Raj carried with it all the portents of its coming collapse. Men were at breaking point. In 1945, there were around one hundred full time psychiatrists in the theatre, who, by the end of war, ran between forty and fifty psychiatric centres in India, Burma and Ceylon. They reported that Indian troops were particularly badly affected: many had been in continuous service for three and a half years, with no leave for two. There were cases of suicide on disembarking in a new theatre, with a hostile climate, with no prospect of return to deal with domestic problems. Indian troops were confronted by racial prejudice of European settlers and the unease of other Asians who saw them as a new army of occupation.

But the imperial grand design was defeated on two fronts. And on both of these the legacy of the INA was vital. Congress supported the new republics of Vietnam and Indonesia and inveighed against the use of Indian troops abroad. In October 1945, Lord Wavell demanded their urgent withdrawal. When the British fought Indonesian nationalists in the battle of Surabaya, which remains the largest single engagement fought by the British after 1945, Nehru demanded to visit Java to assess the situation and offered crucial support to its revolution. It was a sign that the leadership of the Indian National Congress was emerging as a regional and even international power. But what was perhaps equally decisive was the mentality of soldiers themselves. Secret reports of morale spoke of their ‘growing sympathy’ for the INA. Troops in the field received direct appeals from Vietnamese and Indonesian nationalists. By the end of the year, there were desertions to the Indonesian republican forces, and Indians embedded themselves in their struggle. After Java, it was clear that further British action against national liberation movements with Indian soldiers would be impossible. This marked the end of the Indian army as an instrument of British world power. Even in their own bailiwick of Malaya and Singapore, the British were now extremely vulnerable to any threat to internal security which might demand the use of Indian troops.

When James Puthucheary returned to Malaya in 1947, it was with the aim of reaching out to Indian troops stationed there. In the end, he spent an equal amount of time meeting with disaffected British troops. At the end of January 1946, there were a series of protests at Royal Air Force bases across the Crescent. They involved perhaps 14 stations and 50,000 men. It began in Karachi and stretched across the British Middle East and Asia: from Gibraltar, Cairo and North Africa, through India to Bengal, and through to Seletar, in Singapore, where more than four thousand men were involved in a strike. In the petitions of the men, the use of the army in India and Indonesia was deplored, as it was seen as the biggest obstacle to their demobilisation. Men with a Labour or Communist Party background founded their own discussion groups and made contacts with the Indian, Burmese and Malayan Communist Parties; their newsheets were run by conscripted journalists who had links with the local press. The press reports and the incessant movement across the theatre through airbases created a connected protest across Asia.
After August 1945, the INA struggle continued to reverberate across the fighting front. It remained Britain’s nemesis. One of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose’s last acts in Malaya was to lay the foundation for the INA Martyrs’ Memorial at Connaught Drive on Singapore’s seashore. One of the first acts of the British was to tear it down. Bose had laid the foundation stone only two months previously. When Jawaharlal Nehru visited the site six months later there was no time to erect even a temporary wooden replica in its stead.

After August 1945 the British took several weeks to reoccupy Malaya. In this interregnum the INA remained a force. The dominant power in the small towns and villages of Malaya was the communist-led Malayan People’s Anti-Japanese Army. It had cooperated with the British, but when the war ended, that cooperation was technically at an end. It approached its erstwhile foe, the Japanese, for weapons. In Sungai Siput in Perak, a resistance heartland, INA men supplied much of the intelligence of the local guerrillas and ex-INA men joined its guerilla forces. The Malayan Communist Party made the decision in 1945 not to rebel, and swayed by the promise of political reform, to develop its open organisation, but connections with ex-INA men would become an important aspect of the labour movements that were a backdrop to the outbreak of the Malayan Emergency in 1948. They saw their struggle in terms of continuity.

A second connection lies in the INA’s vitalisation of Indian politics within Malaya. At first sight the INA connection seems catastrophic for Indians in Malaya. The British took vengeance on the entire community for its support for the INA. Even those Indian soldiers who had not joined the INA faced fatal hostility and neglect. At Neesoon camp in Singapore, 45 men had died in the first three weeks of reoccupation. The shadow of the charge of ‘adhering to the King’s enemies’ hung over the civilians who had supported Netaji. Within a week of reoccupation, many of them were arrested and detained in the notorious Pudu jail in Kuala Lumpur. But this backfired on the British. Local opinion – in all communities – was firm against these arrests. The full weight of Indian public opinion made itself felt in Malaya. In November, a new ‘Agent’ of the Government of India arrived in Singapore, S.K. Chettur, an Oxford graduate and Madras civil servant. He carried himself as if he were the representative of a friendly, independent power. Urbane and at ease in colonial circles, he put pressure on the British authorities to release the detainees, especially by engaging a legal team on the Red Fort Trial model, and by drawing the attention of Indian public opinion to the conditions of solitary confinement of the detainees held in Kuala Lumpur. Racism was exposed when an Indian defendant and his Indian lawyers came in front of white judges and prosecutors. By early December 1945, this issue was causing so much difficulty in India, that it led Wavell to plead personally with Mountbatten to either try the men or release them. The witch hunt against Indian civilians in Southeast Asia rapidly lost all moral force and the prosecutions unravelled. But they cast a long shadow. Many community leaders either left or lay low. The community was effectively leaderless. The labouring masses were very disenchanted with an elite who claimed to speak for them, yet ignored their immediate concerns. It was an article of faith of the Penang shop and municipal workers that they would trust no man who wore trousers or spoke English. In providing an alternative, the INA came to the fore.

This was particularly the case for some 221,000 Indians on the rubber estates. They were subject to one of the strictest labour regimes on earth. They were amongst the Malaysans worst hit by the war. After the general collapse of the export industry, Indians had been easy prey for Japanese forced labour schemes. Of the estimated 72,200 labourers sent from Malaya to Burma and Thailand, over 29,000 were reported to have died and 24,000 ‘deserted’; many of this number were lost in jungle, or disguised statistics of fatalities in the camps. The impact on small estate communities was traumatic: over forty percent of the labour in rubber areas such as Selangor had vanished, and everywhere S.K. Chettur reported the absence of men folk who ‘never returned or returned broken men’. The pre-war years had seen a shift in the population, from the dominance of single men, to family formation; but at a stroke family life was shattered. Yet what was striking about these populations was not merely the poverty of these people but their isolation.
Europeans planters still possessed the means to keep their labour segregated from the world. Estates were private property, subject to strict trespass laws, and labourers were wholly dependent on the management for access to their homes. The labour conductors and the estate clerks – often as not drawn from different communities to the Tamil labourers – were both the natural leaders of these communities, and potentially their worst oppressors. Any outside visitor had to receive the permission of the manager to enter. Planters used all available means to obstruct unwelcome guests. To trade unionists this was a denial of a fundamental democratic right to organise: ‘an attempt’, in S.K. Chettur’s words, ‘to regiment the docile Tamil labourer in a manner that no other body of labourers on earth would dream of being subjected to’.

Before the war, it was difficult to see how the cycle of isolation and neglect could be ended. But the INA was a slow revolution on the estates; it instilled a new confidence and pride. In estate shops, in labourers lines the image of Netaji was everywhere to be seen. For the first time the INA and its civil movement ended their isolation. It fused with Dravidian reform movements on the estates to create unprecedented kinds of organisation. In the plantation frontier of the northern state of Kedah, A.M. Samy, a lorry driver on the large Harvard Estate revived INA supporters in a thondar pedai, or labourers’ militia. He was not even a veteran of standing, although other leaders of the movement were. But the thondar pedai became an army of around 1,500 young men; dressed in old INA forage caps and tattered khaki shorts and trained by pole-fighting in mock battles. Samy branched out to form trade unions on neighbouring estates. They often dispensed rough justice, enforcing anti-toddy campaigns and strikes, but they broke the conductors’ monopoly on power. In October 1947 he led a wave of action against the trespass laws that – for the first time – had managers fleeing their estates. But what was even more striking was that Chinese estate workers – with whom Indian labourers had little in common – were forming a united front. This too was entirely unprecedented in Malaya’s history. Most of these unions began to be drawn into the Communist-led Federations. Its Indian leaders now came forward to help estate workers organise; many of them, including the President of the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions, S.A. Ganapathy, had both an INA and a MPAJA pedigree. In Singapore, James Puthucheary threw himself into the organisation of urban workers.

It is often overlooked by historians that the INA had an impact in Malaya far beyond the Indian community. This was a third, vital connection. The arrival of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in Singapore in July 1943 was a not merely a great landmark in India’s struggle for freedom, it was for all communities in Malaya: Chinese and Malays as well as Indians. Netaji’s rally on the Padang on 5 July, was the first political gathering of its kind. It was the true dawn of mass politics in Malaya. Before the war, there had been small meetings and demonstrations, but nothing on this scale. As one young witness recalled: ‘It was really the first speech, you see, I had heard in my life. Like magnetic power...’ Netaji represented a new type of political personality. One of the greatest orators of Malay nationalism in the post-war era was Ahmad Boestamam. He radiated a charisma which is often accredited by historians to the model of Sukarno and the Indonesian revolution. But in 1945, Sukarno was out of vision. The real inspiration, as Boestamam and others acknowledged, was Subhas Chandra Bose. Young Malay men and women – as well as James Puthucheary and Datin Janaki – had witnessed him on his progress through Malaya, and on English-language broadcasts. Netaji’s INA involved Indian society in Southeast Asian society in a way its earlier incarnation had failed to do. Most crucially, in the words of one volunteer, ‘it had a sense of independence from Japanese manipulation’. It showed how the freedom struggle could take to the streets and to arms. And, for the first time in Malaya, its women showed they could take the lead in both. For all communities, the days of Japanese occupation had a millennial edge to them; the INA was a template for political action.

Above all, INA’s inclusive rhetoric voiced the mood of the times. Nationalism was a universal currency. Colonial Asia was a connected arc of protest. Everywhere local nationalists borrowed the words and emulated the deeds of neighbours, and the language of the Atlantic Charter and the San Francisco Declaration became a common tongue for all. In early 1946, Indonesia’s struggle was first raised in the United Nations, and this
made it a test case for the rights of small nations everywhere. In British Asia, nationalists followed events in India and Indochina and Indonesia as if their own future was at stake, which it was. Across society, trade unions, youth and women’s movements all took up similar slogans. In Malaya, this was marked first by 2 October, with the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi. In Singapore, Indian soldiers fraternised with a crowd some 7,000 strong. The slogans were: ‘Long Live the Independence of India! Long live Mr Gandhi! Long live the Communists in India! Long Live the Malayan Communist Party!’ The British radical, Harold Laski’s campaigning articles were immediately translated into the Tamil newspapers in Singapore. They were united in their opposition to the use of Indian troops: ‘We have no business in Java’. This larger ‘we’ was reinforced by the British servicemen in Singapore – corporals mostly, it seems – who wrote polemical articles for publication in the vernacular press. The INA was the first step in the internationalisation of nationalism. With this came the vital sense of history being open, at a juncture when the peoples of colonial Asia could shape their own future as they had not been able to do within living memory.

This context is vital to the fourth legacy of the INA: India’s continuing involvement in Southeast Asian politics. This was marked by Nehru’s journey to Singapore - via Burma - at the end of March 1946. In Rangoon, he met Aung San for two and a half hours and planned with him an East Asian ‘subject nations’ conference. The Governor of Burma believed the trip was a put up job of the Red RAF. It was, in fact, Wavell who told the British supreme commander in Singapore, Louis Mountbatten, that Nehru was to be treated as a future prime minister of India. When the British could find no transport for him, Mountbatten lent his own, and travelled with him. The sight of Nehru by Mountbatten’s side was a political sensation. Nehru’s first engagement was a visit to a welfare centre for Indian troops in Singapore in the company of the Mountbattens. They were mobbed together with Nehru and had to escape. It was, of course, a fateful meeting. But again, Nehru was feted by representatives of all communities. A crowd of 100,000 people gathered outside the Adelphi Hotel where he stayed. Chinese leaders feasted him at their ‘millionaires club’, the Ee Hoe Hean Club. Wherever he stopped, the local Communists representatives came to see him. He arrived a time when tensions between the Communists were erupting into open irrevocable conflict.

Nehru had agreed not to intervene in local politics, but made twenty speeches in eight days to around 60,000 people. His themes were pacific and pan-Asian rather than the specifics of the struggle in Malaya. The police were worried that support for the INA would resurface. Guards of honour were provided, but it was agreed that they would not wear INA badges. But many wore their old uniforms: some had no other decent clothes. One of his first acts was to visit the Indian political detainees in jail, dispensing good advice on how to keep body and soul together in prison. Congress sent a medical mission that under an ex-INA officer over the a ten week period treated over 17,000 labourers. India’s ability to defend her own was an important test of its leaders’ new authority.

Nehru’s visit was the high-water mark of India’s influence on the freedom struggle in Southeast Asia. But already many local Indians were disappointed by the moderation of his language. At a big rally at Jalan Besar Stadium in Singapore in front of 8-10,000 people, including over 3,000 INA personnel here was a cry of ‘Blood?’ Nehru rebuked the crowd. The time for violence, he seemed to say, was past.

There was one final act to play: the pan-Asian gathering mooted to Nehru by his visit. On 23 March 1947, standing beneath a huge illuminated map of the continent, Nehru opened the Asian Relations Conference at Purana Qila in Delhi. Those present would long remember his words: ‘When the history of our present times comes to be written, this Conference may well stand out as the landmark which divides the past of Asia from the future.’ Nehru and many other Indian leaders felt that they had brought Asia to the threshold of a new millennium. They believed that Congress was the exemplary nationalism for Asia and that India’s
civilisation formed the core of what Tagore had called the ‘inner human bond’ of its peoples. The Asian Relations Conference was a form of missionary outreach to other national struggles. Virtually every nation, or nation-of-intent, from the Levant to China was represented: there were delegations of Jews and Arabs from Palestine; commissars from Soviet Central Asia; courtiers from the Kingdom of Thailand; hardened Communist guerrillas from Malaya, and polished Kuomintang diplomats. The greater number of delegates were from the lands of Britain’s imperial crescent, and the official language of the meeting was English. But the largest individual contingents were from Southeast Asia. Few of the 200 delegates and 10,000 or so observers were known to each other. The visitors were entertained in the Viceroy’s House with the full ceremonial of the Raj, but, in the words of one Irish observer, they ‘felt they were witnessing the last departing gleams of its sunset splendour, not only in New Delhi, but throughout a continent’.

Over the next few days, the delegates surveyed their shared inheritance. Panels on social and cultural problems heard harrowing testimonies to the continuing issue of war. A session on ‘economic development and social services’ revealed that, from left to right, from Malayan Communist to Indian businessman, the new generation of leaders saw a common future in planning and state intervention. The Congress model of struggle was deeply influential. Many Malayan politicians – the Chinese leader, Tan Cheng Lock – for example had spent the war in India, and had admired Congress methods. The Malayan delegation comprised of many figures – Communists, Malays, Chinese, Indians – who were beginning to form into an inclusive united front – a Council of Joint Action – to the British reoccupation, and the ethnic-based conservative Malay nationalism with which the British looked to come to terms. For all of them Delhi was a profound influence and the closing address by the Mahatma, a lifelong inspiration of those who heard it.

But, paradoxically, it was the climactic forum on ‘National Movements for Freedom’ that proved to be the most divisive. The crucial question of how ‘free Asia’ should aid nations ‘struggling to be free’ was left unresolved. In New Delhi there was no echo of the war cry of ‘Asia for the Asians’: the memory of Japanese rule was too immediate and traumatic, and leaders of new nations could ill-afford to alienate the West. The spiritual support offered by Nehru was vitally important. But it was far less than was sought by the Vietnamese, Indonesians and others. Southeast Asian representatives found that they had most in common with each other. In New Delhi they sensed India and China vying for influence, and it alarmed them. The regional entity that was later to emerge, in the shape of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967, was much smaller than that envisaged in New Delhi. The summit was the high water mark of pan-Asian solidarity, but it also signalled the beginning of its decline as political ideal. ‘We seek no narrow nationalism’, Nehru had proclaimed. But narrow nationalism was to prevail. A second meeting in China did not materialise: civil war and cold war intervened. Purana Qila was the start of a road that led to Bandung in 1955. But the Afro-Asia Conference was to be a conclave of sovereign nation-states, and not a parliament of peoples.

But something more than the political mood at Delhi lay behind this falling away. The reality was that slowly, almost imperceptibly, the great Crescent was beginning to fragment. The perpetual motion of peoples across frontiers that had given it unity began to still. By the end of the war, transport had ground to a halt, and borders were battle fronts. By the beginning of 1947, travel, trade and remittance had resumed, and migrant communities raced to restore ties with their homelands. As many as 20,000 Indians from Malaya chose to travel back to South Asia at fares six times their pre-war level. Many returned. But these journeys soon had a new finality about them. Dying empires and new nations guarded their frontiers jealously. More enclosed state structures were being erected that placed more importance on internal identity politics, the local defence of status and nationality, than the pursuit of global sympathies. Much was lost in the process.
A cosmopolitan age – evoked so wonderfully in the writing of Professor Sugata Bose – was drawing to a close. Many of the minorities who had embodied it lost influence, and some were even confronted by the spectre of statelessness. Wherever new ‘national’ boundaries were drawn, they broke up older communities that had transcended them, and left behind ‘orphans of empire’.

Everywhere there were hard choices to be made. For a time Indians of Malaya and Singapore had been at the vanguard of India’s struggle for freedom. By 1947 this was no longer the case, and they faced a dilemma of where to locate their struggle. In August 1946, on Nehru’s advice, a former minister of Bose’s provisional government, John Thivy, who had recently been released from a British jail, founded a Malayan Indian Congress. In its early days, the new party remained firmly anchored to the sub-continent. ‘Indians in East Asia’, Thivy argued, ‘are the Ambassadors of India’. But as they watched the death throes of the Raj, Indian leaders in Singapore and Malaya realised they could no longer rely on New Delhi’s support. In early 1947, Thivy took further advice from Congress in India and argued that Indians should seek their Swaraj in Malaya and adopt local citizenship. He allied the Malayan Indian Congress with the united front of the left. But the independence of India was not an occasion for unmitigated celebration in Malaya. It left local Indians more divided than ever and anxious about their future. Throughout the difficult years to come, INA veterans still paraded in their tattered uniforms, and the inspiration of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was a vital unifying and morale-raising force for the community.

There were other choices to be made, choices that had been anticipated at Delhi. With the fall of Japan, the Great Asian War entered a new phase: it became a struggle against western imperialism and its allies; a war for national freedom and for a new ordering of society. As the British sought to regain their Asian empire, they were confronted by myriad mutinies against old patterns of authority. This was Asia’s revolutionary moment when many previously disempowered groups in society – women, the young, workers and peasants – took the political initiative, for a time, as they tried to rebuild their communities, salvage their livelihoods and regain their dignity. They joined movements that were fired by radical ideologies – social democracy, religious revival, Marxism and Maoism – and these doctrines reacted with each other in a dangerous alchemy. It was, to use the phraseology of the Indonesian revolution, an age in motion, a world-upside-down. New leaders addressed an often bewildered people in exhilarating new language. For many, this sense of possibility, this call to be the agents of historical change, was irresistible. But this would not be solely a conflict between imperialism and its enemies. Across Asia, a second conflict was looming, a war that would be fought to neutralise the central political legacy of the first. In the Japanese war, a new generation had formed popular movements that threatened to overturn pre-war hierarchies. In the intoxicating air of the post-war Spring, Asia’s youth had seized the streets and villages, filled them with their propaganda, and stood up against imperialism and feudalism. But now, in free Asia and colonial Asia, this fresh-won freedom – of youth, of women, of workers – had to contend with the re-establishment of more conservative, patriarchal forms of authority. Bosses, landlords, and bureaucrats would attempt to claw back some of the ground they had lost. This was Asian’s new Cold War. 1948 would be a year of confrontation.

In Malaya, it marked the end of the open struggle of the left. Its constitutional struggle climaxed in Malaya’s first hartal in October 1947. And here the inspiration of India was at its most direct. But a new alliance of the British and a conservative Malay nationalism was gaining ground. The Communists and the British were heading for a final confrontation in mid-1948: the Malayan Emergency. When James Puthucheary returned to Malaya he was soon faced personally with the dilemma: how far did the elimination of colonialism
justify the re-activation of armed struggle? For many communists and radical nationalists it was a choice between exile, detention or joining the underground. Putheacheary’s old friends invited him to join them in the jungle. As he explained in a political testimony in 1957, written in a British jail: ‘One is always drawn by the desire to fight colonialism and the urge to join up with those who are fighting hardest is irresistible. It often appears that to refuse to join such allies is to be dishonest to one’s anti-colonial principle. But in such an alliance one is always tormented by the fundamental differences one has with one’s allies’. His old boyhood companion, William Kuok was killed by the security forces in 1953. ‘You have not lived your life in full’, James wrote in an epitaph, ‘not seared by the shame of cowardly past’.

The line later became James’ own epitaph. I have invoked James Putheacheary’s story as it invokes many connections between this house and Southeast Asia. In marking the achievements of independence, it reminds us of what was lost. Some of those caught up in the white terror of 1948 and after survived to play a part in national life. But many did not. The Emergency extorted a high toll in political talent. James Putheacheary himself would serve two long stretches of imprisonment by the British. He served briefly as an architect of Singapore’s socialist road to development. He was then arrested and banished from the island. Like so many, he never really played the role that had been allotted to him.

This evokes a final theme. Official narratives have sought to obliterate people like James Putheacheary from historical memory. But their lives were never whole extinguished. Their voices continued to resurface, and I believe these voices from history have a great deal to tell us about the possibilities of cosmopolitanism, its rich heritage and its problems. Important statements recently have been made about the need to re-assess the radical cosmopolitan nationalisms of the 1940s and 1950s. These lives are a vital critical resource for this. In Malaysia, in the mid-1990s the Indian community launched its own initiative, in the name of Netaji, to gather memories of the struggles of these years. The right of the Chinese community to commemorate their fallen, including the Communists, has very recently been the focus of intense public debate. As Malaysia faces its future, James Putheacheary, and his writings, remain a centre-piece of any imagining of a non-communal, just Malayan nation. This has happened in spite of the state and of any official narrative.

It takes great courage and great commitment to keep these legacies alive. It is for this reason that, with great humility, I am very honoured to celebrate the achievements of Sisir Kumar Bose, as a freedom-fighter, a doctor and humanitarian, but also for his work in creating such a visionary home for this work of memory in the Netaji Research Bureau, on its golden jubilee. I thank you for your indulgence.
LAST August, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore organized a seminar entitled “The Forgotten Army in a World at War: Subhas Chandra Bose’s INA and its Effect on Asia’s Independence”. The seminar was held at Singapore’s Regional English Language Centre, a fact that some might find curious given its theme and others might find fitting in the sense of the Empire writing back, the departure of the colonial English being a political necessity for turning English into an Asian language. At the event, several veterans of the Indian National Army spoke of a dawn when it was bliss to be alive, but to be young was very heaven⁴. With the support provided by the Netaji Research Bureau, we screened a documentary film that reflected the colours of the age in their overlapping contours of pain and hope. Professor Sugata Bose and his mother, Mrs Krishna Bose, attended the conference. In his keynote address, Professor Bose got to the heart of Netaji’s legacy when he declared that Netaji’s family and his nation were coterminous. Indeed, that nation itself is coterminous with peoples who embraced the INA’s cause in lands far away from India.

Wartime Singapore is, of course, at the heart of Netaji’s extended legacy because it was in Singapore that he revitalized the INA, thus joining the wartime destinies of South Asia and Southeast Asia. Given that colonial India was plausibly the reason behind Thomas Raffles’ founding of Singapore,² it is pointedly significant that the historical actor who embodies India’s relationship with Singapore more than anyone before or after him was a sworn enemy of the British Raj that had created the second colony in the service of the first.³ Following his arrival in Singapore, Bose galvanized the masses. Professors Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper argue that the “people of Malaya had never before experienced a political presence in the mould of a giant of the Indian National Congress. Subhas Bose drew crowds to public rallies on an unprecedented scale: Chinese and Malays, as well as Indians... This was the true dawn of mass politics in Malaya”.⁴
The success with which this mass mobilizer destroyed the imperial grip holding the colonized imaginations of the Raj together makes him as much a part of Singapore’s history as of India’s.5

The August seminar reflected the continuing importance of the connection. The generations crossed the aisles in the auditorium. INA veterans who had made history with Bose mixed with young people, including school students, for whom Bose and his comrades are figures from the pages of history. It was very much a family gathering. There was a palpable sense of identity in the audience, which consisted mostly of both Indians from India and Indian Singaporeans. This was a cultural identity in the largest sense: an identity born of a shared sense of history, whether experienced directly or transmitted orally by those who had survived to tell it.

Yet, the seminar also excavated sentiments embedded uncomfortably in those overlapping histories. Part of the feedback that the Institute received was the reminder that the Japanese had treated Chinese and Eurasians with horrendous brutality, and that Bose had been on the wrong side of a war that had ultimately been between the forces of democracy and socialism, and those of Nazism and fascism.

**One War, Many Wars**

The Bose phenomenon is important because it calls attention to the divergent attitudes that different communities in colonial Singapore had towards World War II. For the Chinese, “the war in Malaya was an extension of the war in China.”6 For China, World War II had begun, not with the German invasion of Poland in 1939 but with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria earlier back in 1931. It was only when the Second Sino-Japanese War that had begun in 1937 had merged into the Pacific War after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941 that Chinese travails at Japan’s imperial hands were elevated to membership of a global contest between fascism and democracy. The Japanese attack on China had galvanized the overseas Chinese in Singapore and Malaya to aid their besieged homeland. They paid a terrible price when the Japanese arrived in Singapore. However, geography was not the only marker of destiny: ethnicity, too, was. Thus, even those Chinese in Singapore and Malaya who did not identify with China were not spared. Professor Wang Gungwu observes that a Chinese could have been born in China; he could have arrived in Singapore or Malaya a few years earlier, having witnessed the Japanese depredations in China; or he could have been local-born, a Chinese who was third-, fourth-, or fifth-generation removed from China. It did not matter. It did not matter even if a Chinese spoke Malay and identified with Malaya. Then, he became suspect as a pro-British Chinese hostile to the Japanese empire.7 When the Japanese arrived in Malaya, they simply brought the China war there with them. And the Chinese became natural victims.

If for the Chinese, whether in China, Malaya or Singapore, World War II was an extension of Japan’s war on China, for Indians in India and Southeast Asia, the same war was an extension of Britain’s politics by other means played out in India. Colonialism provided the existential link here. While Japanese atrocities in China and Southeast Asia were real enough, they were cast in relief by colonial atrocities that merit the label of war. The manmade Bengal Famine of 1943, which killed half the number of humans who perished in the Jewish Holocaust, was the British Raj’s war on its own subjects. (To say this is not to reduce the enormity of the Holocaust but to place in perspective the enormity of the Famine.) As Indians in Malaya and Singapore contemplated the break in history that the INA had made possible, what was uppermost in their minds was the opportunity to drive the British from India. The Japanese defeat of the British in Southeast Asia provided the natural beachhead for that foray.

Bose hated imperialism in any form. He was concerned about the new German nationalism and had attacked Hitler’s racist diatribes against Indians and Hermann Goering’s disparaging remarks about Mahatma Gandh.8 His admiration for Japan was not uncritical, either. In an article, “Japan’s Role in the Far East”, published originally in the Modern Review in October 1937, he had written:
Japan has done great things for herself and for Asia. Her reawakening at the dawn of the present century sent a thrill throughout our Continent. Japan has shattered the white man's prestige in the Far East and has put all the Western imperialist powers on the defensive – not only in the military but also in the economic sphere. She is extremely sensitive – and rightly so – about her self-respect as an Asiatic race. She is determined to drive out the Western powers from the Far East. But could not all this have been achieved without Imperialism, without dismembering the Chinese Republic, without humiliating another proud, cultured and ancient race? No, with all our admiration for Japan, where such admiration is due, our whole heart goes out to China in her hour of trial.9

The INA's alliance with the Japanese was tactical. “Japan's major military concern was the overall strategy and prosecution of the Pacific War, in which India was a peripheral concern,” Romen Bose writes. He adds: “For Indians, military cooperation with Japan brought the goal of independence within the realm of possibility.” The INA's and Japan's goals were different. This is why Bose believed at the end of World War II that “Japan's surrender was not India's surrender” and this is why he turned his attention towards the Soviet Union, a power that he considered anti-imperialist and on which his Provisional Government had never declared war (as it had done on Britain and the United States). Convinced that the tables would soon be turned against the “imperialist democracies” and that the next war would be fought between the “old and the new imperialists”, he believed that India should take advantage of the “inter-imperialist feud”.12

But what wartime Malaya was facing was not the imperialist wars that Bose was thinking about but an Anglo-Japanese war of imperialists. In the circumstances, therefore, divergent responses in Malaya and Singapore to World War II were not extraordinary. As Janadas Devan writes, “the Japanese were not occupying India; the British were. The British were not occupying China; the Japanese were. Different communities, therefore, responded differently to geopolitical events...”

Divergence and Convergence

Divergence was not the only consequence of the war; however; it produced a degree of convergence, too. In the lives of Indians in Southeast Asia, this convergence was apparent in both their intra-communal and their inter-communal relations.

In a paper presented at the August conference, our colleagues Professor A. Mani and Professor P. Ramasamy write of how, in colonial Southeast Asia, Indians were conceived of as hailing from British India but were also classified into categories that allowed the government to control them better. In the colonial classification system, Sikhs and Pathans formed the soldiers, and Sikhs, Tamils and others populated the police force. Given the task of controlling labourers from the Madras Presidency, who spoke Tamil but were illiterate, were Tamil-knowing but English-speaking clerks whose mother tongue was Malayalam. The Ceylon Tamils, though Tamil-speaking, formed “a class by themselves” because of their work: white-collar administrative jobs below the British civil administration. Then there were financial and commercial caste groups from the Madras and Bombay presidencies.

The war and the Japanese invasion destroyed the ligaments of that plural society, one in which occupation had corresponded generally to classified ethnicity. Indians sought transition to other jobs. The Sikhs in the Tanjung Priok Harbour of Jakarta, for example, who had worked as watchmen in the pre-War years, became contractors for Japanese naval ships. Other watchmen became employers and businessmen. In North Sumatra, many Tamils were trained to become truck drivers and contractors.

Even as the disruption of the economy and administration allowed some Indians to move up, it forced others to move down. Wartime realities brought elements of the Indian administrative and clerical classes, who had looked down at Indian labourers through the lenses of the colonial economy, closer to their ethnic
brethren. Having been forced to leave the towns and seek safety in the countryside, where they had to perform agrarian tasks to make a living, the middle class was humbled by its exposure to the underside of colonial life and began to identify with Indian labourers.16

All in all, the war years created a sense of Indian identity that had been lacking before the advent of the Indian Independence League and the INA. This palpable sense of identity – partly spontaneous and partly enforced by the Japanese refusal to countenance sub-communal Indian identities in their effort to build a unified Southeast Asian Indian opposition to British rule in India – cut across linguistic, regional, caste and religious lines.17

If the war created the intramural conditions necessary to make diasporic Indians think of themselves as one, it also introduced the extramural reasons for new Indians to draw closer to the new Chinese and others who had been produced by the war. For one thing, although the Japanese treated Indians and Malays far more leniently than they did Chinese and Eurasians, there were limits to their goodwill. The forced recruitment of even Japanese-friendly Indian labour, like hostile labour from other communities, for the construction of the infamous Death Railway from Siam to Burma was “the most unforgettable and tragic episode of the Occupation” for Indians.18 Between 1942 and 1943, more than 80,000 labourers were recruited forcibly with the cooperation of Asian intermediaries. Less than half returned to their families. Indian labourers, like labourers with other ethnicities, paid a price whose heaviness is exemplified by the fact that the Indian population fell by almost 100,000, or nearly 7 per cent, during the Occupation.19 When it came to indenture and worse, Japanese imperialism could be a close cousin of British colonialism, closer than either side would have cared to admit.

It was the subaltern legacy of such burdens that, after the Japanese defeat in the war, created the basis for cooperation among diverse communities in Singapore and Malaya on driving out the returning British. In this effort, the INA found a partner in the Malayan Communist Party (MCP). Following the INA’s debacle at Imphal, Indians returning to Malaya were contacted by the MCP and were later recruited into left-wing organizations that were gearing up to fight British rule. In Michael Stenson’s words, “as hopes of an Indian liberation faded, thoughts turned to Malayan realities, to the struggle for survival and to specifically Malayan politics”.20 Indians who now turned towards the left continued their struggle against British imperialism that the INA had initiated. To study links between Malayan Indian and Chinese in the growth of left-wing unionism after the war is to situate Indian anti-colonial militancy in the context that the INA had created. That militancy provides a pathway into the struggle for independence in Singapore and Malaya.21

Past and Present
Radicalism is not the dominant motif of post-colonial Southeast Asian history, however. The alternative narratives, offered provisionally by the legacies of the INA and the MCP, have been subsumed by state-building and nation-building in Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere.22 In the dominant story, World War II plays a problematic role. As Diana Wong writes,

“Hardly any traces of the Japanese Occupation can be detected in postwar Malayan public memory or, until very recently, in that of the city-state island of Singapore. The war has not been memorialized; indeed, it would seem that its memory has been directly silenced”.23

One reason for the silencing, Wong observes, is that Singapore’s “unremitting narrative of survival” has been “anchored in the present”24. But she adds that, after about three decades of independence, Singapore’s existence as a “city-, island-, nation-state” no longer appeared an anomaly, and an earlier sense of fragility gave way to the “conviction of success”.25 The year 1992, the 50th anniversary of the onset of the Occupation, appeared to mark the “reinsertion of history into Singapore’s public culture”.26 Playing up the divergent memories of the war in the early years of independence would have exacerbated the problems of nation-building in ethnically diverse Singapore. But the passage of time, and the entrenchment of the idea that there is a Singapore beyond and above the historical experiences of its various ethnicities, has made it possible to ask delicate questions about the war, who caused it and why, who suffered and how, what it led to, and what it did not lead to.
Today, Subhas Chandra Bose’s legacy in our part of the world has several dimensions. The first, to repeat the point made by Professors Bayly and Harper, is that his rallies in the region mark the dawn of mass politics in Malaya, an era that broke sharply with the patrician manoeuvrings of colonized elites as they sought terms of endearment with imperial Britain. Bose turned Indians in Southeast Asia from objects to subjects of history. Even if his presence in the region had achieved nothing else – which it did – this much would have sufficed to prove his revolutionary credentials. Corresponding with this role is his second legacy: the rejuvenation of the very sense of India itself. His muscular nationalism lanced the image of a people whose bodies and minds were full of oozing sores left by successive waves of invasion that had produced a supine, wretched and abject populace that had to be ruled by the latest invaders in India’s own good. Breaking with the theory of martial races, the INA concentrated on Tamil Malaysians and others to prove that India and Indians could fight on their own terms, not as foot-soldiers of others’ wars. Also, the INA broke with communal theories and periodizations of Indian history by merging in its ranks Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and others who, in the colonial dispensation, were apparently fated to tolerate one another at best and kill one another at worst. In this, the INA represented the possibilities of an India where nationalism would not have to contend with the false divisions exacerbated by divide-and-rule policies. Within this general empowerment of the figure of the Indian lay his particular empowerment of women as equal partisans in an anti-colonial struggle that was ultimately against the entrenched structures of imperial patriarchy on which colonialism thrived. This was Bose’s third legacy: to empower the Indian female to the remarkable extent that, next to him, it is the Rani of Jhansi who is inscribed as the most notable personality in the INA tradition in Southeast Asia today. The battlefields of Imphal and Kohima were great gender equalizers in this regard. Bose’s fourth legacy is a reminder of the timeless power of commitment, of how leadership is based not only on charisma but on sacrifice. Forgotten Armies cites a Singaporean INA recruit, P.K. Basu, as having said: “I did not believe that the INA would actually succeed, but I believed in the INA.” Singaporeans and Malayans believed in it because Bose promised them nothing but blood, sweat and toil if they believed in independence. His fifth legacy is more problematic: the reminder that one war can be composed of many wars, and that different ethnicities can be drawn quite legitimately into those different wars that set them apart. In independent Singapore, the challenge was to acknowledge the different ethnic sources of its citizens, most of them immigrants, while pointing them towards a common destination that, while not race-free, would at least be race-neutral. Has Singapore succeeded? While nation-building anywhere, but particularly in ethnically diverse societies, cannot but be work-in-progress, it says something about the uses of history that Singaporeans can freely discuss – as the two of us have just done – the different pathways to their history represented by iconic personalities such as Raffles, Sun Yat Sen or Subhas Chandra Bose without accusing each other of disloyalty.

Today, as a free, modern, secular and democratic but also a militarily powerful India seeks its place at the table of great powers, spread not least in Southeast Asia, it would really not do to speak of Subhas Chandra Bose in the past tense. What should we make of his legacy? As the seminar in August last year in Singapore and this gathering has shown, both Bose and the army that he created continue to fire the imagination of scholars and laymen alike.

I extend my best wishes to the Netaji Research Bureau in its efforts to keep the legacy alive.

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1 Among the veterans who spoke at the seminar was Mrs. Rasammah Bhupalan, who was a member of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment. She recounts her experience of the INA years in Footprints On the Sands of Time: Rasammah Bhupalan: A Life of Purpose (Kuala Lumpur: Arkib Negara Malaysia, 2007), pp. 49-104. Another speaker was Mrs. Janaki Athi Nahappan. Her reminiscences may be found in “The Rani of Jhansi Regiment”, in Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose – A Malaysian Perspective (Kuala Lumpur: Netaji Centre, 1992), pp. 42-6.


5 Latif, op cit.


9 Sisir K. Bose and Sugata Bose (eds.), The Essential Writings of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 190.


15 Ibid.

17 Mani and Ramasamy, *op cit*.

18 P. Ramasamy, “Indian War Memory in Malaysia”, in Lim and Wong, *op cit*, p. 93.

19 Stenson, *op cit*, p. 90.

20 Ibid., p. 100.


22 An analysis of this issue can be found in Asad-ul Iqbal Latif, “Singapore’s Missing War”, in a forthcoming volume on the 60th anniversary of World War II published by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.


24 Ibid., p. 230.

25 Ibid., p. 234.

26 Ibid., p. 230.


28 On this point, see Latif, “Singapore’s Missing War”, *op cit*. 
I am very pleased to be able to release the 12th volume of Netaji’s Collected Works today. The period covered by this volume is 1943-45 and it is particularly appropriate that the release of this volume takes place in Singapore, where Netaji spent those years. At the outset, I would like to express my deep appreciation to Prof. Sugata Bose who has edited the Collected Works. I join him in mourning the absence of Dr. Sisir Kumar Bose, his co-editor and Netaji’s nephew. I am sure that he is with us in spirit today. I would also like to thank the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the Singapore Indian Association for their initiative in organising this function in Singapore.

In perusing this volume, a number of thoughts cross our minds in respect of Netaji himself, the historical significance of the struggle that he led, and the long-term impact of ideas that he so effectively articulated. The period 1943-45, as you are all well aware, represents the zenith of his endeavours. This volume, in fact, covers many of his key speeches and exhortations. We see the different dimensions of Netaji - as a political leader, as a military strategist, as an analyst of his contemporary global scene, and above all, as a humanist who connected so uniquely with those beside him. Many of the speeches and writings are of an emotional nature, which can move a reader even six decades later. But there are others as well, which reflect Netaji’s deep analysis and perceptive thoughts about India and its future. On the occasion of this release, it would probably be most appropriate to dwell on the contemporary relevance of Netaji and his message.

To my mind, the most immediate lesson that we can draw from Netaji’s life and his endeavours is understanding of the importance of the external environment in shaping national destinies. It is by now widely recognised that the collapse of the British Empire came about as a consequence of political, military and social developments in which Netaji played such a leading role. The British may have won the war in 1945, but in the process of doing so, were compelled to accept fundamental changes in how the system was run, which made the empire untenable by 1946. In his special message on 15 August 1945, Netaji had expressed confidence that “There is no power on earth that can keep India enslaved. India shall be free and before long.” If within two years to that very day India attained independence, it was because Netaji leveraged a global situation to mount enormous pressure on the colonial regime. International politics offers both opportunities and risks, as much today as it did 60 years ago. Netaji demonstrated a boldness of vision.
and action that had great consequences for India’s freedom. Today, in a very different environment, India debates the linkage between the international system and our domestic processes of change. We can draw strength and confidence from Netaji’s policies as we engage the world more intensively.

The impact of Netaji on Singapore specifically and Southeast Asia more broadly was dramatic. He infused courage and determination among those who were willing to resist colonialism. His very presence provided greater confidence and self-respect to communities that had earlier simply accepted their fate. He was not just a leader of the Indian National Movement but a dominant personality in a larger anti-colonial surge that spread through the entire region. His impact on national movements in Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia is indisputable. If you read or re-read some of his addresses to a larger audience in this volume, the broadness of his vision and the generosity of his temperament come through very strongly. We in India are currently engaged in reconnecting the country with Southeast Asia and East Asia. This is the kernel of our “Look East” policy, which is expressed in many dimensions and facets. To be successful, we have to draw upon the legacies of history. This may go back to the Nalanda era or the Chola period. But in its more contemporary manifestation, there is no more powerful symbol of India’s brotherhood with the nations east of us than Netaji. I am sure that in the times ahead, there will be still greater appreciation of his contribution to shaping the post-War developments in this region.

In November 1944, Netaji gave a lecture in Tokyo on “The Fundamental Problems of India.” It is covered in this volume and I would particularly commend that lecture to the attention of those who may not have read it before. In this speech, Netaji dispels many colonial myths about India. He does so with pride but without jingoism. He analyses the impact of other national movements on India, which buttresses the point I made earlier about his internationalist approach. Netaji also attempts what he calls a sociological analysis of modern India. He differs with Mahatma Gandhi on many issues, but does so with respect and without rancour. But the most interesting element of his talk is what he outlines as the key priorities that would have to be addressed by modern India - self-defence, poverty and unemployment and the problem of education. These are exactly the issues that we in India are grappling with in our current reforms.

In a national movement that was driven by secularism, Netaji was probably the most secular of its leaders. His commands, directives and speeches, particularly of the INA period, convey that commitment in the strongest terms. The congruence between true nationalism and secularism - which Netaji embodied - is a principle that India can neglect only at its own cost. Whether it was his choice of language, his selection of symbols, or his preference for companions, Netaji taught us that India’s unity was truly in its diversity. That lesson will always be a key to our progress.

Before I came here for the book release, I visited the site where the INA Memorial once stood in Singapore. It was a poignant moment. A full appreciation of the historical significance of Netaji and his life is still underway. But I believe that this series of his Collected Works will do much to make that possible. I would, once again, like to express my appreciation to the organisers of this event. Thank you.
Welcome Address,
23rd January 2007
Sugata Bose

Shri Gopal Krishna Gandhi, Governor of West Bengal, and distinguished guests,

Jai Hind! On behalf of Netaji Research Bureau I am delighted to welcome you warmly to this joyous occasion - the Traditional Netaji Birthday Assembly - on Netaji’s 110th birth anniversary. This year we are also celebrating the Golden Jubilee of the Netaji Research Bureau founded by Dr Sisir Kumar Bose in 1957. On the Silver Jubilee of this institution in 1982 Dr Sisir Kumar Bose wrote as follows in an editorial of NRB’s journal ‘The Oracle’: although twenty-five years constitute the usual creative span of one generation, they are a small period of time in the history of a nation. We reject all sense of personal self-fulfilment for whatever has been achieved. It is our belief that Netaji Research Bureau has so far fulfilled a small part of its distinctive role as a path-finder in studies in contemporary Indian history.

Fifty years of dedicated work across the creative span of two generations have taken us further along that path, but there are still miles to go. Growing up in tandem with the Netaji Research Bureau has been for me a fascinating experience. The most rewarding aspect of this close involvement has been the good fortune of seeing at close quarters the men and women who fought under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose for India’s freedom. I have vivid recollections of S.A. Ayer, Minister of Publicity and Propaganda in the Azad Hind Government, who came often and served for three terms as Chairperson of the Netaji Research Bureau. To hear anecdotes about Netaji from him was a special treat, even though one had to be patient as he invariably wept uncontrollably whenever he spoke about his leader. I find him writing to Dr Sisir Kumar Bose in a letter from Bombay on 19th February, 1973, soon after the First International Seminar held in January:

To put it briefly, you may be extraordinarily proud of your achievement. My only regret is that, although my name appears in so many places in the publications, I have not been able to lift my little finger to help you and do my duty...Sugata called on me again the day before he left for Calcutta. I hope he had a comfortable journey and reported to you about my brief heart-to-heart talk with him...Sometimes I really feel that it is a pity that you were not in East Asia in 1943 and so Netaji could not make you his ... on 21st Oct. You would have made an extraordinary success of the job.

Then there was Abid Hasan, Netaji’s companion on the submarine voyage, who was a frequent guest at our home and a regular participant in the activities of the Netaji Research Bureau. Two things brought tears to his eyes - green chillies from his home in Hyderabad and memories of the leader to whom he was completely devoted. And how can I forget the indomitable Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon, Chairperson of NRB in the late 1990s, who passed away last year. Once in the 1970s I disturbed his concentration by asking him to come out of the library to present his paper just as he was putting the finishing touches to ‘The Nehru holds the Irrawaddy’ - the story of the stout defence put up by his brigade against the British in early 1945. He scolded me as he was not quite ready. Dhillon was famous for his bearhugs. Thanks to that one scolding, I had the privilege to receive from this extraordinary soldier of freedom the warmest bearhugs he could offer for the rest of his life. Year after year he regaled audiences at Netaji Bhawan with his oratory, his impassioned recitation of Urdu shaeri, and his spirited rendering of INA songs. His immediate predecessor as NRB’s Chairperson was Prem Kumar Sahgal. I can think of only two of Netaji’s men who did not usually show their emotion - Prem Sahgal and Sisir Bose. The only time that Sisir Bose broke down on this stage was while paying a tribute to Sahgal soon after the death of the INA hero in 1994.
Lakshmi Sahgal wanted very much to be with us today, but her frail health prevented her from doing so. We are delighted that her comrade-in-arms Janaki Thevar Athinahappan has joined us once more from Malaysia.

Our golden jubilee marks the publication of Chalo Delhi, the twelfth and final volume of the set of Netaji’s Collected Works. NRB’s publication programme goes back a long way. The collection of materials commenced in 1957 and Crossroads appeared in 1961 followed by Patrabal. The Indian Struggle and many other books by and on Netaji, including Netaji and India’s Freedom, the proceedings of the First International Netaji Seminar. During the first two decades the publication programme was piloted with unflagging zeal by Benode C. Chaudhuri. I remember he would come every year on 22nd January with the book of the year and declare that he was now going to take a dip in the Ganges and this was the last book he would ever publish. He would then return on 24th January after the birthday festivities and say, ‘Well, Sisir, tell me what shall we publish next year?’ The project of publishing the works systematically in twelve volumes began in 1980. In the year of the diamond jubilee of India’s independence we have the satisfaction of having redeemed our pledge to bring the corpus of Netaji’s work before the public eye - not wholly or in full measure, but very substantially.

When I see streams of visitors from different parts of the world coming to the Netaji Museum today, I cannot but recall its early beginnings - two men, Sisir Bose and Naga Sundaram, hammer and nails in hand putting up the historic photographs. Naga Sundaram, a Tamil migrant in Burma who joined the INA and fought in Imphal, arrived at Netaji Bhawan as a refugee, much like James Putcheary mentioned by Tim Harper in his lecture on the 21st, with the difference that he never left until his death in 1998. On his last visit to the Netaji Research Bureau Netaji’s friend Dilip Kumar Roy had said: ‘Sisir, there is no exact Bengali equivalent of the word loyalty because we Bengalis do not know how to be loyal. But you have shown what loyalty truly means.’ I am not sure whether there is a Tamil term for loyalty, but Naga Sundaram was certainly exemplary in his loyalty to his leader, to his institution, and to the cause of Indian freedom which he held dear.

But loyalty to Netaji never involved any defensiveness about criticism. The Netaji Research Bureau has always been an open venue of free expression for every serious scholar or student of history, politics and international relations. We are delighted to have with us today Leonard Gordon, Joyce Lebra, and Nobuko Nagasaki who have been coming to the Netaji Research Bureau for decades. As Leonard Gordon said in his preface to his biography, Dr Sisir Bose gave him every cooperation in his research in terms of archival materials, but not once did he tell the historian what he should write in his book. It is only fitting that the Netaji Oration in NRB’s golden jubilee year was given the day before yesterday by one of the greatest historians in the world today, Professor Christopher Bayly of the University of Cambridge. The day before yesterday I praised the breathtaking, evocative narrative and razor-sharp, historical analysis in Bayly and Harper’s Forgotten Armies and Forgotten Wars. They have also managed to be remarkably judicious and fair in their treatment of the key players in the titanic struggle that was waged during the 1940s in the crescent that stretched from Singapore to Calcutta. There is need for criticism and sensitive understanding, as Ambassador Kesavapany stressed yesterday, as we sift through the entangled webs of history and memory to forge new connections between South and Southeast Asia.

In conclusion, let me underscore one other sentence in Sisir Bose’s silver jubilee manifesto. He called for a ‘non-sectarian plan of studies and research on a long-term basis on the entire course of our struggle for freedom.’ The operative term is ‘non-sectarian’, not just transcending the interests of particular religious communities, but espousing a generous and capacious understanding of different strands of the independence movement. When our speeches are done, you will hear Dohar perform the birthday concert. When I last heard them in a recording studio, I was enchanted by a beautiful folk-song composed on the occasion of one of Mahatma Gandhi’s visits to Assam. They also have a song on Netaji in their repertoire. I hope they will sing both. Today India is in need of both the ‘Father of our Nation’ and his rebellious son.

Jai Hind!
PRESIDENTIAL SPEECH 23rd JANUARY 2007
GOPAL KRISHNA GANDHI

Esteemed Prof. Krishna Bose, Datin Janki Thevar Athinahappan, Prof. Leonard Gordon, Prof. Joyce Lebra, Prof. Chris Bayly, Dr. Harper in the audience, Mr. Roy Chowdhury, my dear and distinguished friend Prof. Sugata Bose, members of the consular corps, distinguished invitees:

I would at the outset like to say that we are commemorating today the 110th birth anniversary of more than any individual. We are commemorating the spirit of someone who translated his physical forms, his political initiatives, and the dynamism of his spirit into something which can only be described as a miracle.

Can you imagine one person combining through his efforts the history and the charisma, the magic and the magnetism of Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi of 1858 of Jhansi and Gwalior with living magnetism of Datín Janki Thevar Athinahappan of Malaysia. Two different parts of Asia. Two different cultures, two different historical traditions, in one amalgam of one dedicated action. Only a miracle could have done this. So we are today witnessing in Datín Janki Thevar Athinahappan, the living actuality of a miracle which connected the first war of Indian independence with the last war of Indian independence which we were privileged to see enacted under the leadership of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. So Datín Janki, when you are present today, you are giving us the tactile proof of what can only be called - though an unscientific phrase - a miracle.

We were privileged to hear from this dais on the 21st two extraordinary presentations by one of the greatest historians of our time and his distinguished co-author and colleague. They approached the saga of Netaji’s work through the prism of scholarship and research. But they could also analyze the indefinable operations of the Indian mind and the Indian phenomenon which defies logic, which defies the common milestone of reason and leads us to the results which are sometimes beyond the reckoning of those who commenced the journey. I could see from their presentations what Upacharyar Raj Roy described as new connectivities in historiography. But more than anything else I could see in their presentations the need for a constant evaluation and revaluation of the processes of nation building and of the processes of mass movements and of, what can be called, political struggle which go beyond politics as well as struggling. Constant evaluations and revaluations - for the simple reason that new material as it comes in, new perspectives as they come in give us new opportunities and more than that they also make us fitter to face contemporary problems.

One of the first impressions that I carry as a child of seeing photographs of historical personalities has a humorous angle to it. Some of those of my generation in this audience will remember, that in the 20s, 30s and 40s there used to be an amplification system - a microphone system - which was patented by a certain Bose. I do not know who that Bose was, but many microphones captured in photographs of that generation had Gandhi speaking, Jawaharlal speaking, Maulana Saheb, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel speaking with the microphone which had a crescent like disc with the word 'Bose' written on it. And so I used to imagine that whatever these people were saying, they were saying so, in the name and through the voice of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. They were unaware of the name that was written on that disc. But I as a child used to imagine that Netaji was something above and beyond what was being said. He was in other words the conveyer of the great messages that were being conveyed.
But it is also true to say and this I say self critically - I would urge my listeners to be equally critical - that for good quarter of a century or more the influence of Netaji on the independence struggle was obscured, for no rational reason. I do not say that it was deliberately obscured. But it was obscured for the simple reason that the present moment is more vivid than the one that has preceded it.

I would like to draw the attention of this gathering to the chronological fact that when the mist of time took away Netaji’s biological presence in 1945, he was but 48, much younger than the average age of this audience. In 1947 by which time his call to the nation ‘Delhi Chalo’ had impressed itself on the minds of our nation and the great trial of the INA had been enacted in Red Fort, it was given to another pair of great hands to unveil the flag. Had Netaji been alive in 1947 he would have been only fifty, an amazingly young age. Had he been alive when India became a Republic he would have been only fifty three. Had he been alive when in 1952 when the first elections were held, he would have been only fifty five. I am conscious of the fact that I have used the phrase ‘had he been alive’ for there are many who believe that he was alive.

And I have no evidence one way or the other. But when I say ‘had he been alive’ I mean ‘had he been present in our midst’. Had he been present in our midst in 1952 when the first general election took place he would have been only fifty five. In 1962 when another round of elections took place and the great Sino-Indian dispute broke out, had Netaji been in our presence he would have been only sixty five. And in 1971, when Bangladesh was liberated Netaji would have been just seventy four. Today there are people who are seventy four and plus leading our country.

We have no voice before the action of time. We are powerless before the enactments of mortality. We are puppets in the hands of chronology. But we are free to imagine what might have happened had a certain chronology been different. We are not only free but I certainly speaking for myself feel that we are duty bound to ask ourselves what certain things might have been like, had a certain chronology been different.

Professor Sugata Bose ended his perfect speech today, perfect in diction, perfect in delivery, perfect in concision by referring to the father of the nation and his rebellious son. I would like to say today that Mahatma had four sons, Mahatma and Katurba but more correctly speaking I should say Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Kasturba Gandhi had four sons. Mahatmas do not have natural families. So Mohandas and Kasturba had four sons. The first of them was a rebellious son, the son of Mohandas and Kasturba. And it is said when Gandhi was assassinated, the youngest of them was so overcome and spoke like a child and said to the corporeal frame of his father, “Speak to me, Bapu, speak to me!” The next elder son Ramdas cried, the next elder son Manilal fasted, but the eldest, the rebellious son Harilal - who was completely rebellious but still completely devoted - when he was told that Mahatma had been killed then he said, as anyone in his position could be expected to say, though going on the wrong side of the law, he said, “I will kill the man who has murdered my father.” Another person to whom the phrase ‘son’ has been applied is Jawaharlal Nehru because he had been named by Gandhiji as his ‘political heir and successor’. A few days before his assassination when Jawaharlal came to Birla House, he heard a group of sloganeers outside the house saying ‘Gandhi Murdabad’. They were refugees from Pakistan who had great reason for resentment against the message which Gandhiji at that time was delivering to India. ‘Gandhi Mordabad’, ‘death to Gandhi’ and Jawaharlal sprang out of the car into which he was getting when he heard this and rolled up his sleeves and went up to them and said in Hindi, “Who said, ‘Death to Gandhi’, ‘Kisne Kaha’, let him kill me first, ‘Mujhe pahele maro.” Subhas Bose was not in Delhi on that day. But let me say this, begging pardon of the historians who are present here because they work with facts, with reasons, with empirical data, and not with mere imagination, my apologies to them, let me say this that had Subhas Bose, the rebellious son, as Sugata described him, had been present in Delhi his contribution could have been something else.
And may I share it with you? I think he would not have had to say like Harilal – ‘I will kill the man who has murdered my father’, he would not have had to say like Jawaharlal – ‘Who said death to Gandhi, let him kill me first’. If Subhas Bose had been on the scene he would have prevented the assassination. I say this not because I think he would have been the home minister in charge of the police department, I say this not because he would have been the deputy prime minister in charge of the another department, I say this not because he could have been the prime minister. But I say this because as a secularist, as a person who could link Rani of Jhansi of Gwalior of 1858 with the 1940s, as a person who believed in Hindu-Muslim unity, he would not have allowed the divide between Congress and Muslim League to take the shape it did. He would have been an extraordinary pillar of integration which would have made the partition of India not only redundant but unthinkable. I for my part, as no historian, as no student of even newspapers of that time, but just as an ordinary observer feel that if Netaji been given the chance to spend the period between 1945 to 1947 with us in India the story of our subcontinent would have been different. What does that mean for us today? Let us assume that in 45 he moves into the mist of time, and let us not spend anytime whether the year marked his death or not. He is, if anyone is in India, deathless and I believe that today he would have helped us confront a great reality.

I am aware of the fact that this gathering has many people from outside India and when a family speaks within itself it lowers the guard and can speak with great frankness. But when there is somebody outside the family certain forms of protocols are maintained. But there is a higher protocol than the protocol of conversation, it is the protocol of frank understanding and communication. And I would therefore like to say, despite the fact that we are not entirely an Indians’ gathering today, that we have to train a very sharp light on to our own selves. It is wrong to use certain phrases in conversation as we used to do casually a few decades ago. We no longer say a certain word for which we have substituted the word leprosy patient. Similarly we do not use lame man, blind man. We have better phrases. And those keep changing from physically challenged to differently abled and things like that. So I think we should not use sane and insane and schizophrenic to describe societies. So without using the phrase or the phrases which I have just mentioned let me say that we as a country today are in a state of multiple confusions. And this is a frank statement. And I think self-criticism is always good. And India is not the only country which is in a state of multiple confusions, I think every person from outside India in our hall today in this gathering today will perhaps say this of his or her country also but let us say that we are in a state of multiple confusions.

Some of us want capitalism with a human face, some of us want human faces with capitalism, some of us want agriculture without industry, some of us want industry without agriculture, some of us want socialism without Marx, some of us want Marx without social avenues of public redresses. We are suffering a deep crisis of identity. There is something called the right which is right wing in its social agenda, but left wing in its economic agenda. There is something called the left which is left wing in its political agenda, but right wing in its economic agenda. So, where is right, where is left? Where is North, where is South? North and South, as somebody said are not places, they are directions. And coming to Right and Left, I would like to take this opportunity to say expanding of what Prof. Chris Bayly said that Subhas Chandra Bose represents the social philosophy for the future of India. And I will elucidate something before I conclude and that is this; you can turn more and more left, you can turn as left as you can be and you will still find somebody further to your left saying the same thing that you were saying in shriller voice that there is one ultimate left beyond which there is no left. And that is the truth. And I believe that is where the father of the nation and his rebellious son stand today in that point beyond which there can be a no Leftism or Rightism.
Because it is the truth. The time has come when we must make the truthful powerful and we must make the powerful truthful. I have seen Netaji’s portrait in many an attire, as you have, in Indian clothes, in western clothes, in the clothes of a soldier, in the clothes of a General. There are varieties of attire sometimes in disguise. Now do not think that Gandhiji was always as we always know him to be, he has been through several several phases of attirement. And he has also once memorably tried out a disguise in South Africa. All of you would have heard of what I am going to recite. There is a verse from an English liberal in which he says: Hitler with his brown shirts riding for a fall; Mussolini who has black shirts back against the wall, De Valera with his green shirts caring not at all, three cheers for Mahatma Gandhi with no shirt at all. That was the Father who has been through phases when he did have very expensive shirts — I can assure you. But Netaji with his many appearances, many forms including those in disguise irrespective of what he was wearing was the same Subhas Chandra Bose inside what he was wearing. Today I can wear the same dress and be multiple phenomena of all the multiple confusions and hypocrisies of my time. That is the difference with Netaji. The truth Netaji stood for and the truth Gandhiji stood for. And when we are celebrating one, let us not think we are diminishing another. We regret now where are our leaderships, where are our leaders. And it is not unnatural for us to ask that question. It is true that we do need leaders. I will not end on a pessimistic note, but I will say this that if you do not have and if you had not seen since 1945 a living presence of Netaji amongst our country, we have something else which cannot substitute for his living presence but which can do perhaps do something. And that is the living testimony of his written and spoken word which the Netaji Research Bureau has over the last so many decades been giving to us. And if NRB had become a shrine where we annually come and place flowers at Netaji’s feet and depart, it will still have been doing something good but it would have been doing something which is not enough. And the fact that NRB is encouraging a critical historical research for that entire phase and all the heroes and heroines and the non heroes and non heroines - that fact makes me confident that NRB will not only have a great future for itself but will be an example for similar studies being carried out in the name of other illustrious personalities in India and in the region which was so powerfully brought a light for us by the two presentations on the 21st. Myanmar and Malaysia are integrally connected to us and yet we have forgotten the fact. We are beholden to both the scholars for their erudition, for their objectivity. Datin, may you be given health to many years to come and may we have a good fortune of seeing you present those shawls to Krishna-di and Sugata for year after year of this anniversary and may we have the chance to say thank you to you and through you to the great connectivity of time of which Upacharya Rajat Roy reminded us all. Thank you
About twenty four years ago, in December 1937, I had the great fortune of meeting Subhas Babu.

Subhas Babu was then in Badgastein, Austria. I wrote to him from Vienna that I wished to film him and would be very happy if he could spare a couple of hours.

Subhas Babu replied inviting me to come to Badgastein. His letter carried no address and had only a post box number. On receiving the letter I did not waste a moment. I packed my bag and left for the train station and bought a ticket for the first train leaving for Badgastein.

Vienna has one of the biggest train stations in Europe. What we call Vienna the Austrians refer to as Wien. I took the train from Vienna. After a few hours the train stopped at a particular station. I then took a train car from there.

I was told that we would reach Badgastein only at eight in the night. As I did not know Subhas Babu’s address I thought of taking a hotel room for the night and making enquiries next morning at the post office. Even before I left Vienna I had picked up a free brochure on Badgastein which contained information – the tariff, availability of rooms, various facilities, distance from the train station - about the various hotels there. I had made a note of the cheapest hotel and decided to take a room there.

The motor train went on the plains for a certain distance. Later it went through the Alps. There is a valley twenty five miles long and one and a half miles wide three thousand feet above the sea level. Badgastein is one of the towns in the valley. An internationally famous health resort it is known for its warm spas which could cure nervous weakness. People had resorted to Badgastein even from the seventh century. Subhas Babu too was staying there only to recoup his health.

The train car reached Badgastein at eight. About ten agents from various hotels were at the station. They cried out the names of their hotels and invited customers. I called out for the name of the hotel I had noted down. Its agent came to me and picked up by bags.

At that moment a tall man from among the crowd of agents spoke out for a minute. I could not make out what he said as he spoke in German. Everybody seemed to nod their heads in agreement. The agent who had earlier picked up my bags left them with the tall man. I followed him out of the train station.

There was snow everywhere – on the roof tops and on the mountains looming over 10,000 feet. The moon shone brightly and silence reigned everywhere. I have never seen a more wondrous sight ever.

The tall man who had picked up my bags loaded them on to a sledge. A tall and strong dog pulled the sledge. We walked alongside and reached the hotel in a while. Only then did I realize that he was proprietor of the hotel.

He hastened into the hotel. In a few moments Mr Narayana Nambar emerged and asked in surprise, ‘We had only given the post box number in our letter. How did you manage to find us here?’

‘I never knew that you were here. As soon as I got off at the train station, this man said something in German to the other agents and then brought me here. I don’t know anything else.’
‘Seeing that you are an Indian and assuming that you could have come here only to meet Subhas Babu, he must have brought you here. Good, come in’, said Nambar.

Nambar took me to the dinner hall. There was a big wine bottle on the huge table there. Two European women and an Indian were at the table.

I had met Nambar only a few days earlier at the Czechoslovakian capital of Prague. Nambar’s recommendation too was behind Subhas Babu’s invitation to visit him at Badgastein.

Nambar is a good writer and very knowledgeable about European political affairs. He said that he had been in Europe ever since 1917. A good friend of both Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Babu, he had also worked as the European correspondent of well-known papers such as the Hindu. After Indian independence he was our ambassador to West Germany.

He introduced me to the people at the table. The Indian there was the son of Subhas Babu’s elder brother who was then studying at England and was visiting for a few days.

The two women were Austrians. The older woman was Mrs Fullop-Muller. Both she and her husband were well-known writers who deeply loved our country. The younger woman was Subhas Babu’s secretary whom he later married.

Nambar said that Subhas Babu was in the adjacent room and that he would inform him of my arrival. ‘It’s already late. Please don’t bother him. I can meet him tomorrow,’ I said. Saying that ‘I’ve to inform him or he’ll be cross with me’, Nambar went into Subhas Babu’s room. He returned in a while and said ‘Subhas Babu will be here in a few minutes’.

As soon as this news came the wine bottle was hidden away and everybody left one after another and closed the door.

I sat alone in the hall. I had heard and read so much about Subhas Babu. But I had never imagined that I would meet in person alone.

Subhas Babu had been elected as the president of the 1938 Haripura Congress session. His influence in Congress circles was at its zenith.

I waited with bated breath for him to arrive. So many lakhs of people in India were eager to have a darshan of Subhas Babu. Few could meet him alone in India. But here I was and wondered at my great fortune. At the same time I was also a little edgy.

The door was opened. Subhas Babu entered. He was dressed in trousers and a long black coat and a cap. He was fair and had an impressive personality. His eyes exuded kindness. As I stood up and greeted him in the Indian manner, my limbs trembled.

Subhas Babu sat on a chair and motioned me to take a chair beside him. ‘Did you have a safe journey? Have you had your dinner?’ were his first words. And then said, ‘I’ll make arrangements for you to stay here itself. We’ll talk at leisure tomorrow.’

He then called the hotel owner and asked him to get the room on the top floor ready. He took me to the room himself and checked if there was drinking water and showed me the toilet facilities. He took leave with the words, ‘Sleep well and we can meet tomorrow’.

But I could barely sleep. When there were so many at his beck and call, I was moved by his gesture in personally checking out the drinking water and running water facilities in my room. I was still unable to recover from the pleasant surprise of having met Subhas alone.

I thought over how to film him the next day. I had both a still camera and a moving camera. I had bought the still camera in Germany only a few days earlier. It was an expensive one and I had not yet used it. Therefore I was apprehensive about how it would actually work. When I fell asleep it was rather late and I woke up unusually early in the morning.
I had breakfast with Namibari next morning. I learnt that Subhas Babu always breakfasted in his room and came to the dinner hall only for lunch. Namibari also told me that Subhas Babu was then writing a book on India in English.

I roamed around the town for about an hour after breakfast. I looked for a place to develop the films and found two shops.

I returned to the hotel for lunch. Subhas Babu was seated at the head of the table. Others sat on either side. We ate slowly. It took over an hour to finish lunch. Subhas Babu spoke on various matters. His conversation was marked by resolve and humour. He spoke to everyone at the table on some matter or the other. Everyone was happy and pleased.

‘We go out for a stroll at three every afternoon. Be ready to join us’, said Namibari. I took a number of pictures that afternoon. The next morning I made Subhas Babu sit on a chair at the entrance of the hotel and took a few snaps. Before clicking the camera I requested him to smile. ‘I do not smile under orders’, he replied.

As it was very cold I was wearing gloves. As they were rather thick I found it difficult to either focus or click the camera. Unmindful of the cold I took off my right glove and clicked two pictures. By then my fingers had become numb. When I clicked next I did not notice the blood oozing out my thumb. On seeing this Subhas Babu rushed to me. Bandaging it with his handkerchief he said, ‘Enough of taking pictures! Let’s go in.’ I packed up my equipment and took the chair into the hotel.

I took a few more pictures that afternoon. I gave the films for developing immediately. The shopkeeper asked me to come the next morning. Only after ensuring that the pictures had come out well did I feel relieved.

I filmed Subhas Babu on the moving camera as well. Badgastein did not have the facilities to develop the moving images. I could develop them only in Rome.

My work was done in three days. I had planned to return to India via Italy. Subhas Babu said, ‘What’s the hurry? If you wish you can stay for a few more days.’

I had the fortune of staying with Subhas Babu for one whole week when I had only requested for two hours. Everyday I looked forward to lunch and dinner. I was fond of food; but I was even fonder of Subhas Babu’s conversation.

One day at lunch, Subhas Babu read out an English poem written and sent by Dilip Kumar Roy. They were friends from school.

I went out for a walk with Subhas Babu every afternoon. Everybody wore hats. I did not have one. Seeing this Subhas Babu said, ‘It’s not good to go bareheaded in this cold. I have a hat to spare. You may wear it.’

I had planned to book a train ticket to Rome. On knowing this Subhas Babu said, ‘There are no travel agents in this town. We need to go to another town four miles away. I’ll take you there this afternoon.’

That afternoon all of us went to the neighbouring town on a sledge drawn by dogs. Subhas Babu spoke in German to the travel agent there and bought me a train ticket to Rome. He also looked through the train timetable printed in German and noted down the relevant details in English.

By then it was six. Subhas Babu asked us to go back in the sledge while he would walk back. None of us wanted to leave him alone. But neither did we have the courage to argue with him.

We returned to Badgastein. We were restless until Subhas Babu returned. It was impossible to make out the ditch from the street in the snow. And we were worried that he could be in danger. He returned at eight.
When I left Badgastein I did not have enough Austrian currency. I said that I was going to exchange British currency at the money changers.

Subhas Babu then said, ‘I shall be going to England in a few days. We could exchange the currency.’

The British currency I had were all silver coins in denominations of half shilling, one shilling, two shillings and two and a half shillings. I made a calculation and mentioned a figure in Austrian currency.

Subhas Babu looked at the coins and said jocularly, ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve been to England. I am not sure if your calculations are right. Please don’t cheat me.’

I took leave of everybody. Nambar came to the train station to see me off.

On arriving at Rome I enlarged the pictures shot at Badgastein and sent them to Subhas Babu’s Kolkata home.

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In 1938 I wrote to Subhas Babu for permission to film the Congress Working Committee meeting at Wardha. ‘Please send your cameraman and I shall provide all the necessary help’ wrote Subhas Babu in reply. The letter had been written at four in the morning.

In 1940 I expressed my wish to meet Subhas Babu at Kolkata. By then he had left the Congress to float the Forward Bloc.

I received a telephonic message to meet him at one in the afternoon. I arrived at the appointed time at his Elgin Road residence. His secretary took me to his bedroom. Subhas Babu was resting on his bed after lunch.

‘Please do not mind for talking to you lying in bed. When I meet familiar persons I do not observe formalities. Did you see that I have hung the pictures you shot at Badgastein on my walls? I love the snow. Recently I was in Chennai. The Congress boycotted me. But the people of Chennai gave me a royal welcome’.

This was my last meeting with Subhas Babu.