

Bose, his files, and rewriting his history

21 September 2015, New Delhi, Dr. Amba Pande



Yes, Bose's files are important but that issue should not overshadow the other more important aspects of his life and personality, writes Dr. Amba Pande.

The discussions on Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, in the recent past have overwhelmingly focused either on the declassification of his files and the mystery surrounding his death, or the "fascist" tag, completely overshadowing his personality, his legacies, and his place in history. Rewriting Netaji's history goes much beyond these media grabbing issues. In fact, I find it demeaning because Netaji's actual contribution is no less (if not more) than several of the leaders around whom our "history" has revolved. Some facts like, he played an instrumental role in India's freedom struggle and built the Indian National Army (INA) are widely known but many other aspects of his dynamic life and personality have neither been researched nor highlighted. One such less talked about aspects is Bose's overtures in Southeast Asia and the goodwill he created for India in the region and among expatriate Indians/Indian diaspora which this write-up intends to underline.

Bose was already a well known and popular figure when he landed in Sumatra in 1943 and made Southeast Asia his field of action. He crisscrossed the region and was greeted everywhere with great fervour. Being fully aware of the importance of propaganda (calling it more powerful than "howitzers") he used all the available means like public rallies, speeches, print media, radio to showcase his cause and put forth his ideas. The meticulous planning and efficiency with which he organised the INA, ran the Provisional Government of Free India, and pursued diplomacy with other Asian powers, in addition to his ideas of non-communal national cohesiveness, left a long lasting impression on the subsequent movements and leaders in South East Asia.

Nevertheless, most significant impact of Bose's advance in Southeast Asia was on the Indian communities settled in the region. Bose carried the national struggle beyond the borders of India and gave the expatriate Indians, a unique courage, self-respect, and unity, to fight for the cause. Indians in Southeast Asia were a divided lot at the time (or still are) constituting people of different languages, cultures, regions, castes, religions, occupations, as well as belonging to different phases and patterns of migration from the Indian subcontinent. The larger section belonged to the labour class forming the lowest rung of the society in terms of economic and the social status. By taking the Indian political consciousness and freedom struggle to the Southeast Asian soil, Bose managed to bring together these otherwise scattered and divided Indian communities in an unprecedented unity.

Although the INA was already functioning under Capt. Mohan Singh, the advent of Netaji completely galvanised it. He recruited Indians from across all castes, classes, religions, regions, including women, youth, and the marginalised. The expatriate Indians looked up to Bose as the answer to their prayers and committed their wealth and services to him. Participation in INA activities, and the military training gave a sense of dignity and self-confidence to the otherwise subjugated or resented Indian communities.

They were exposed to a whole new world view in the INA camps and were fed with political activism and leadership skills which got an expression in the labour and social movements in the years to come. The movement also had an impact on the socio-cultural milieu of the expatriate Indians. The participation of women in the INA activities almost created social revolution. Women came out from their traditional roles and took mainstream responsibilities fully at par with men. They were trained, they fought, and they took leadership positions opening new vista towards women liberation.

Another remarkable attribute which Bose displayed was the exceptional diplomatic genius and precision with which he dealt with various issues at the same time successfully managing to strike a near perfect balance between all the stakeholders. When Bose arrived in the region, Indian communities were caught up in problematic issues like citizenship, vernacular education, and remittances with the locals and the governments. In spite of this, Bose was not only able to build extremely successful relations with the local governments (who stood by him till the end), thereby creating an unprecedented goodwill between the Indians and the local communities/governments but also managed to help Indian communities significantly by bringing them under a protective umbrella.

In Malaya, the direct result of Indian participation in INA was the politicisation of the Indians who then on became very active in the local politics. Bose's diplomatic manoeuvres in Burma can be cited as the most interesting case. This was when Burmese Independence Army (which was fighting against the British with Japanese help) turned against the



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Japanese. Bose successfully managed to sustain the camaraderie with the Burmese leaders, while continuing to be supported by the Japanese. He also continued working closely with the Indian communities despite lot of resentment against them in the locals and finally managed to bring about a significant change in 1943, when the Burmese government issued a notice to treat Indians as “friendly third power” instead of enemy subjects.

Similar instances could be found in Malaysia, Thailand, and other countries where Bose managed to maintain a fine balance between his mission, local politics, and the welfare of Indian communities.

Bose’s overtures in Southeast Asia are an apt example of the fine balance which is needed to effectively synchronise foreign policy goals with the interest of diaspora populations along with developing the “community cohesiveness” and a sense of belonging in them. Unfortunately, after Independence, India failed to build upon the goodwill which Bose had created in Southeast Asia and the strong “Indian” consciousness which he had nurtured among the Indian communities. Even after so many years of Independence and the drastic policy shift in 1990s India still appears to be struggling to achieve successful harmonisation between the concerns of its diaspora and its diplomatic relations whether it is in Myanmar or Malaysia.

Yes, Bose’s files are important but that issue should not overshadow the other more important aspects of his life and personality. Already the Indian history has been unfair in giving due to the one of the greatest leaders this country has ever produced and in turn has kept us deprived of the extremely valuable history and know how about governance, diplomacy, foreign relations, and the diaspora.

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