

## Bose, beyond the 'Mystery'

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**Commentary**

**Bose, beyond the ‘Mystery’**

Amba Pande

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose has featured prominently in the news—and hence the public consciousness—only from time to time. As was often the case earlier, the recent prominence he has been given has been confined largely to the classified files concerning him and the mystery surrounding his death—reported or real. Although public and media activism can be credited for the pressure built up which led to the partial declassification of files, it is time now to go beyond these limited aspects of the life and times of a personality as great as that of Bose. It is time now to start looking at other, greater aspects and perspectives that bring out the dynamic and multi-faceted life he led. Particularly the larger-than-life persona of Bose—Bose the philosopher, the leader, the statesman and then of course Bose the diplomat *par excellence*. All these aspects of his personality are clearly evident in his tryst with the Indian National Army (INA), the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India and his engagement with expatriate Indians/the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia, which is exactly what this article attempts to bring out.

In this article I mainly propose to highlight two key aspects of Subhas Chandra Bose’s presence in Southeast Asia. The first is his impact on the common people and the politics of Southeast Asia. The second is his approach or reaching out towards Indian communities in the region and most importantly, how he effectively managed to maintain a fine balance between the two—considering the turbulent relations the Indian communities had with the local people and the governments at the time.

In 1943 the intrepid Bose successfully evaded the British Empire and travelled to the island of Sumatra, first by a German and then by a Japanese submarine from Europe. He was a popular and heroic figure in Southeast Asia even before his arrival. He travelled widely in the region and was greeted everywhere by enthusiastic crowds. Bose, the leader, knew the importance of propaganda, and more so, how to use the medium effectively. All the possible methods—public rallies, public speeches, the print media and also the radio—were used to put across the noble cause and the ideas he espoused fervently. Bose, within his first few addresses only, was able to lay out a comprehensive and complete plan for the role of the INA and also the Provisional Government of Free India. Consequently Bose took over the leadership of the Indian Independence League (IIL) from Rash Behari Bose and of the INA and galvanised it into a movement—taking it to new heights not reached before. On October 21, 1943, Bose officially proclaimed the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India in Singapore.

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During those years the Indian communities in the region were—to a large extent—caught up with problematic and critical issues like citizenship, remittances and the issue of vernacular education, with the local governments and the people. In spite of this, Bose not only was able to establish extremely successful links with the local governments (who stood by him till the end), thereby creating an unprecedented goodwill between the Indians and the locals, but also—simultaneously—managed to bring the Indian communities under a protective umbrella.<sup>1</sup> However—and this is a significant pointer to his greatness as emphasised in the introductory lines—Bose's canvass was much wider than all this. Bose stood for a true and real Asian unity, for the emancipation of women, for non-communal cohesiveness and last but not least for personal character.<sup>2</sup>

### **The impact Bose had in Southeast Asia**

Bose played a key role in the nationalist awakening in Southeast Asia. His speeches, INA public rallies, propaganda drive and mass mobilisation had a great impact on creating strong anti British sentiments in the region. In the words of S. R. Nathan, the former President of Singapore, Bose's Padang speech on July 5, 1943 (in which he gave the famous 'Dilli Chalo' slogan), 'marked the dawn of mass politics in Malaya among Indians .... [Though] Malays and Chinese were not parties to the Indian struggle ... but Bose's presences created an atmosphere which led many to take part in demanding better treatment from the British after the war.'<sup>3</sup> The effect of Netaji's presence was instantaneous. The meticulous planning and efficiency with which Bose organised the INA movement, governed the Provisional Government of Free India, and forged close diplomatic ties with Asian leaders left a lasting impression on the upcoming movements in the region. Southeast Asian leaders had always looked towards India and the Indian National Movement for ideological direction but now a section of emerging nationalists—disillusioned with the strategies of the Indian National Congress (INC)—were also convinced with the concept of an armed struggle as advocated by Bose.

The INA movement under Bose also had appreciable influence on local leaders like Aung San (Burma) and Ahmed Boestamam (Malaysia) who led their own movements against colonialism. Boestamam's writings ascertain this fact repeatedly. The Malay Nationalist Party and the Burmese National Army (BIA) organised itself on the patterns of the INA and adopted Bose's strategies.<sup>4</sup> When Bose arrived in Bangkok and met Prime Minister Phibun Songkhram he donated generously to Thai hospitals and the university. In return Thailand extended all its support, a move that brought the Indian community closer to the Thai government and people. In addition the massive charitable work taken up by the health and social departments of the INA throughout Southeast Asia effectively won over the hearts of the local population and brought them closer to Indians.

In Burma, where the INA headquarters were later shifted to, Bose maintained close relations with local leaders and the people. The Burmese Independence Army was also fighting against the British with the help of the Japanese. However, when anti-Japanese sentiments came to a head in Burma and the BIA turned against the Japanese, Bose successfully managed to sustain the camaraderie with the Burmese leaders, while continuing to be supported by the Japanese.<sup>5</sup> He also continued working closely with the Indian communities despite a lot of resentment against them among the locals. With his leading efforts mostly amicable solutions were reached and

the two communities kept away from open confrontation, as earlier, due to the presence of Bose.

Bose attended the Greater East Asia Conference in Tokyo in 1943, as the head of the Provisional Government of Free India, and addressed the heads of states from Asia. His impact was such that he instantly earned their support for India's liberation and also Japan's promise to hand over the Andaman and Nicobar islands. While dealing with the Japanese or the other Southeast Asian leaders, Bose never accepted a subordinate position for himself or his countrymen. He was cautious of the imperialist and aggressive intent of the Japanese and firmly believed that Indian independence should be achieved by Indian efforts only. He maintained and followed throughout that only INA columns fighting under Indian commanders would enter the Indian soil. On the one hand he was eager to show gratefulness to his ally, and even met General Tojo after the defeat of Japan to show his gratitude but, on the other hand, he successfully managed to limit Japanese interference and maintained the INA's independence.

### **Bose and the Indian communities**

Bose's most exceptional effort in Southeast Asia was in successfully reaching out to the Indian communities in the region. The exemplary and significant impact of Bose's efforts brought the Indian political consciousness and freedom struggle to the Southeast Asian soil and managed to bring together the otherwise scattered or even divided Indian communities in an unprecedented display of unity. The magnitude of the efforts must be understood against the backdrop that the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia was constituted of a diverse set of people who had migrated at different times and phases, with varying patterns of migration as well as regional origins. Added to this were the diversities and differences in terms of culture, language, region, religion and caste, coupled with occupation-related differences. However, the larger section belonged to the labour class forming the lowest rung of the society in terms of economic and social status.

The INA movement impacted all these sections of Indians. While Bose spoke in Hindi and English, his speeches were translated into Tamil. Indians looked up at Bose for the answer to their prayers and committed their wealth and services to him. Participation in INA activities gave dignity and pride to the otherwise resented or subjugated Indian communities across Southeast Asia and gave them the opportunity to connect and contribute to the motherland. The camps and the military training by the INA proved particularly important as it filled the Indians with self-confidence and leadership skills. The trainees were exposed to a whole new world view while in the camps and were fed with political activism which found expression in the labour and social movements in the years to come.<sup>6</sup> The exact number is not known but as Stenson mentions, around 500–1,000 underwent officer-training, around 20,000 training for other ranks and the rest underwent part-time military training including the 'Balak' and 'Balika' sena for youngsters and children.<sup>7</sup> Nathan writes, 'The INA and the IIL had made an impact: after the war it was no longer possible to treat Indian labourers like serfs. They learnt discipline in the army and became highly motivated.'<sup>8</sup>

Bose sought to create a spirit of justice, equality and discipline in the INA by following communal living, joint celebration of festivals, merit-based promotions and strict penalties for discriminatory behaviour of any sort. He also saw martial training

as a way to discipline Indians and make them physically competitive to the British. Recruitments were done not only for the army but for other purposes. Membership cards of the Provisional Government of Azad Hind were issued and an oath of allegiance to the INA cause was taken by every member. Believing in the idea of ‘total mobilisation’ Bose tried to create a personal connect of every Indian to the INA cause. Bose believed and successfully put into practice the idea that a sense of national identity can powerfully work against the divisiveness of communal distinctions.<sup>9</sup> Although many suggest that the pan-Indian unity that was fostered could not actually lead to a genuine transformation,<sup>10</sup> there could be no doubt that ‘Indian consciousness’ and unity among Indians reached its zenith during those years. By infusing new spirits and vigour into them, Bose made heroes out of docile plantation labourers.

In Malaya, the direct result of their participation in the INA was that the Indians now became an integral part of local nationalist organisations and also of the numerous political parties. In Burma, there were around 800,000 Indians but they were settled in isolated pockets. Bose’s arrival had an electrifying effect on them and despite their hardships they donated money for his activities in Burma. In Thailand and several other countries similar phenomena were witnessed. The goodwill Bose created in the region, to a large extent eclipsed the local hostility towards Indians and heralded an era of better understanding between Indian and other communities. Bose was also a great administrator which he displayed when Imphal came under the rule of the Provisional Government. Bose formed the National Bank of Azad Hind and issued currency notes and postage stamps to be circulated in the occupied territory instead of using Japanese currency.

Most importantly, Bose’s vision and leadership ensured women participated in activities of the INA—almost creating a social revolution among the expatriate Indian communities. Women came out of their traditional roles and, with positions at a par with men, took up mainstream responsibilities. The recruits of the Rani of Jhansi regiments, who took up the cause of the nationalist struggle at ages as young as 16 years, gained a new sense of self-discovery and fulfilment as they trained, fought and assumed leadership roles. All this opened new vistas towards women’s liberation in general.

Bose’s overtures in Southeast Asia are an apt example of the fine balance which is needed to effectively synchronise the foreign policy goals of a country with the interests of diaspora populations along with developing ‘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 the 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.<sup>11</sup>

Working at an extraordinary pace during a short span of time in Southeast Asia, Bose left invaluable legacies that are yet to be mapped. Our history has been unfair in not giving the just dues to one of the greatest leaders this country has ever produced and in turn has kept us deprived of extremely valuable history and knowhow about governance, diplomacy, foreign relations and the diaspora.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes**

1. Amba Pande, 'Bose, his Files and Rewriting his History', *Millennium Post*, New Delhi, September 21, 2015.
2. See Nilanjana Sengupta, *A Gentleman's Word: The Legacy of Subhas Chandra Bose in Southeast Asia*, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore, 2012.
3. S. R. Nathan, *An Unexpected Journey: Path to the Presidency*, Editions Didier Millet Pte Ltd., Singapore, 2011, p. 108.
4. See, Christopher A. Bayly, 'The Eve of Freedom: Subhas Bose and Aung San', Special Netaji Oration 2007, Netaji Research Bureau, *The Oracle* 30(1), (2008), pp. 23–32; Timothy Norman Harper, 'Revolt in Malaysia: The Indian Connection', Special Netaji Oration 2007, Netaji Research Bureau, *The Oracle* 30(1), 2008, pp. 33–40.
5. See M. Stenson, *Class, Race, and Colonialism in West Malaysia*, University of British Columbia Press, Vancouver, BC, 1980; Nilanjana Sengupta, no. 2.
6. Nilanjana Sengupta, no. 2, p. 29.
7. M. Stenson, no. 5, p. 96.
8. S. R. Nathan, no. 3.
9. See, Amartya Sen, 'Is Nationalism a Curse or a Boon', Special Netaji Oration 2007, Netaji Research Bureau, *The Oracle*, 30(1), 2008, pp. 13–22.
10. Rajesh Rai, *Indians in Singapore 1819–1945: Diaspora in the Colonial Port City*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2014.
11. Amba Pande, no. 1.