

There's no record to disprove Bose's death

It is time we understand that for a figure like Subhas Bose, there is no greater honour than to die in the battlefield in the war for freedom, insists Harvard's Professor Sugata Bose, in an expansive interview with Sayandeb Chowdhury

Shtyamal Chakraborty

The setting of the large, airy, six-windowed second floor room at Netaji Bhavan is doubtlessly the most fitting location for an interview of this nature. This room is directly above the room where he, the talismanic subject of our discussion, for better part of his adult and incredibly eventful life, lived. His grandnephew, Harvard Professor SUGATA BOSE, in an aubergine kurta and his genteel and scholarly eyes fixed keenly on the subject, sat across the vintage mahogany desk with a McIntosh looming in the background.

But much bigger than the table or the 42-inch screen or anything in the mansion on Elgin Road was the omnipresence of the man who was the subject of our discussion. Subhas Bose. It's been more than sixty-five years that he is officially and mortally considered dead. And has since lent his name to a raging controversy about his life and legacy, much of it to do with the fate he seemed to have met in his 'posthumous life'.

Wasn't it difficult to embark on a subject as diffident and politically controversial as Bose? Wasn't the choice made

difficult by Professor Bose being family as well as a historian of great repute, both of which made making generalisations unacceptable? "The day I embarked on writing the biography, I made a conscious decision of not writing a memoir. And emphatically not as a Bengali scholar. None of them were important. Bose himself never defined him narrowly as a Bengali leader or statesman and there was no reason why I should have done that either while writing about him. I

embarked on it with the intellectual rigour and industry of a historian and have kept it at that. Of course getting access to family archives was a great help but I would insist that my surname is an accident of chance and have not any bearing on my being the author of this book", Professor Bose said.

This is clear in the nature of the biography itself, which is as much political as personal, bearing clearly the expanse and depth of research, the non-participant voice of the narrator/historian and the kaleidoscopic references that form the backbone to Bose's becoming the international figure that he envisioned himself as. "Yes, the thrust of this book is locating Subhas Bose's life in the context of world affairs in the first half of the 20th century. In fact, far from being a Bengali inquisition, the book started by trying to do the opposite, by trying to extricate Bose from the Bengali, even Indian context and examine his anti-imperialist role on a global scale. He was on a global odyssey and book tries to retrace his steps, understand his volition, lend a keen ear to his ideas and perhaps also understand his longing for a free nation state that he envisaged India as."

Indeed, on reading the book closely one would recognise how in our understanding of Bose, especially when much of it is received wisdom, we have been so partisan in our assessment of him. "In Bengal, there is overemphasis on the late 1930s, more specifically his fallout with the establishment at the Indian National Congress. Many forget conveniently that there was a kind of realignment between him and Gandhi in 1942, where each inched close to each other's position vis-à-vis the British rule. But even before that, from the Great Escape in 1941, his forging of alliances, his perilous 90-day submarine voyage to Asia and in a short two years — between 1943 and



1945 — his miraculous training and forming of the INA and fighting two wars in India's North East is stuff that's largely been and very unfortunately so, subsumed within a framework of textbook heroism. But when one looks at the events closely as a historian, it is a filled with incredible details and nuances dominated not only by the indefatigable spirit and will of one man but also his skills as a diplomat and strategist", Professor Bose emphasised.

That's why the book provokes such a sad realization as to how preposterous, how narrow our reading of Bose has been. "Unfortunately our reading of him have largely been through kitsch calendar art, pictures of him as a warrior statesman and his mention in school textbooks as the leader of an army. But his two stints in Europe in the inter-war years, when Europe became a melting pot for all kinds of ideas, Socialist and Fascist, pro- and anti-Empire etc, his thought and action has not yet been studied closely enough. His knowledge of the Balkans was impressive, he was a mature diplomat and strategist, looking at what the world was doing, which way were it headed and what needs to be done not only to free India but also perhaps to give her the rightful place in a new, post-Empire world. While Congress was busy carving out the minutiae of power sharing with other parties and the British, he was already planning a global role for free India. This part of his life and vision was largely understudied." No wonder *His Majesty's Opponent* is being hailed as the most definitive biography of Subhas Bose.

In spite of his long interest in and reading on Subhas Bose, did Professor Bose ever stumble upon a fact that seriously surprised him? "See I wrote this book on a year's sabbatical from Harvard, between 2009 and 2010. But it was preceded by long years of research, reading and visiting the places of interest that the book would entail. But I would still say that the last letter that Emilie Schenk handed over to my mother Krishna Bose in 1994, a letter written in 1936, was one that took me by surprise. She had already donated all the letters and we had already published them in Volume 7 of Bose's Collected Writings. But what surprised me in the last one was not only the romanticism or his pining for Emilie but also the lyricism of the letter."

Talking of his writings and letters, there must be much more in them than was previously thought to be. "Yes of course. I want to specially mention a wistfulness in his tone, a sadness in his

dispatches around 1942, because he pinned to be in India, he was so desperately missing being part of the Quit India Movement."

But he could not have made it since at that time Subhas Bose was forging alliances, some openly, some clandestinely, the world over — some of them controversial, some audacious, some a sheer stroke of genius. "Yes his strategic partnerships were incredible. In his two forced exiles between 1931 and 1936 and then very shortly between end 1937 and early 1938, he got to know Europe closely. He wrote eloquently about this in his essays, rather insightfully, in journals like *Europe Today & Tomorrow*, *Modern Review* etc. They show astute analysis of the global situation. He followed the Balkans closely and the politics of the Czech and Polish legion seriously. He was greatly inspired by the Czech legion when he assembled up the Indian Legion in Berlin. The Indian Legion was the nucleus around which the INA was built."

Here the discussion proceeded from his writings to his readings, especially during his eleven stints in British jails. Here among other regular references, Bose is said to have studied the works of German philosopher Frederick Nietzsche closely, making copious notes. Was by any chance he influenced by the Nietzschean idea of the Superman, an idea that he had held against the monolith of Imperialism as against Nietzsche's own on Christianity. "See, if he was at all influenced by the Nietzschean idea of the Superman, he was no less under the spell of Tagore's idea of *Mahamanob* (Uber-man) or poet Mohammed Iqbal's *Insan Ul Kamal* (Perfect Man). Talking of Tagore, the Bard was very fond of him. Tagore was impressed with Gandhi's political will but not personal habits and views which were rather primitivist. On the other hand he was very impressed with Subhas Bose's progressive, reformist streak, specially on the question of women, whom Bose considered

second to none. But yes, he was influenced by Nietzsche's idea of the ethical man. However, we should be careful here not to make any direct associations between Bose's reading of Nietzsche at a comparatively young age and his alliance with the Axis powers. Also, it was no fault of Nietzsche that the Nazi powers appropriated him." Yes, it was another influential German Martin Heidegger no less who was responsible!

But notwithstanding his great strategic ties and his unquestioned heroism, wasn't the Empire already dying by the early 40s? Isn't it clear in recent historical analysis that in any case, the British could not have continued in India beyond the end of the Second World War? Hence was raising an army, fighting a battle of a lifetime really of imminent necessity, as Subhas Bose envisaged? Hadn't Gandhi, with his flawed but protracted, non-violent non-cooperation already made an unmanageable crater in the Empire's will, especially in India? "See, here there are no straight answers. It is true that some historians are categorical that the British Empire had stepped into its last days the moment it joined the war. But there is an opposing school of historians who say that some in the British leadership, especially Churchill saw in the War a chance to revive the Empire. Also, the War necessitated the deployment of British soldiers in the Indian land at a scale unseen in the past. And still the maximum the British government was talking about was more Indianisation of the administration. So can we say that Subhas Bose's ideas were too heroic? I will even insist that the Red Fort trials of the INA heroes and the ensuing revolt in the ranks of the Indian Navy sounded the bugle on India's march to freedom."

Now it was time to inch to the obvious question. It was a small inquiry that had to be posted straight. Is there any evidence of him surviving the crash? In other words, did Subhas Bose die in the plane crash near Taipei? "I wish I had any reason, record or compulsion to say no to the question. There is absolutely no evidence of him surviving beyond the plane crash that is supposed to have killed him. I have studied all records as best as a historian can do, have looked at all available evidence including the five survivors of the plane crash who gave their statements to more than one commissions and I have no reason to pander to any idea on the contrary than that which announces his mortal end. Here I would like to quote Gandhi who has mostly poignantly commented on the factor of Subhas Bose's death. "He (Gandhi) explained (in an article in *Harjan* on March 30, 1946) that he had nothing but his "instinct" to tell him "Netaji was alive". He now conceded that no reliance could be placed on such "unsupported feeling" that was "strong evidence to counteract the feeling."

It's time that we reconcile to the fact that he was dead. Instead, Subhas Bose seems to have become the symbol of a unctuous Bengali form of grumble in which the centre is held responsible for every evil that has set its eyes on the state. "Truly so. And in any case why not just consider Tagore and Bose as Bengal's gifts to the world rather than trying to bind them to provincial aspiration? Bengalis hardly joined the INA that Bose built to free India. So they should be the last people to complain too much about his legacy. And in any case what can be more glorious, more honourable for a commander battling for free India than to lay his life in the battlefield?"

Is he remembered outside India? "In South and South Asia fondly yes. In Europe and North America for years he was considered worthy of criticism for his alliance with the Axis powers. But lately British historians have sought to re-think his place and to re-interpret his actions as that of a charismatic, powerful and uncompromising leader of anti-imperialist forces anywhere in the world before and during WWII. Nothing will make me happier than to see this book adding to that body of knowledge."



Clockwise from above: The cover of *His Majesty's Opponent*, Sugata Bose in his study at Netaji Bhavan in Calcutta; INA soldiers march past as Subhas Bose takes salute; Bose reviews his troops in Singapore, Subhas Bose's bedroom at the Netaji Bhavan File pictures courtesy the book



Clockwise from top left: Subhas Bose with captain Werner Musenberg during his clandestine submarine voyage to Asia in 1943; Bose with Emilie Schenk at Badgastein in 1936; Bose and brother Sarat with Tagore in Calcutta in 1919; Gandhi, Bose, Vallabh Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru at Haripura, 1938



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