

# Saga of Subhas Bose

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**Brothers against the Raj: A Biography of Indian Nationalists Sarat and Subhas Chandra Bose** by Leonard R Gordon; Columbia University Press, New York, 1990; pp 807, price not stated.

MORE than 45 years ago, Subhas Chandra Bose was killed in a plane crash at Taipei. Though it is customary for the followers of an Indian political leader to rend the air at their hero's funeral with cries of, 'May he live forever', Bose was not similarly honoured. That is scarcely because he lacked followers; quite to the contrary, Bose (like Bhagat Singh before him) may have been the only Indian in the pre-independence phase with as much popular appeal as Gandhi, and he was acknowledged by no less a figure than Tagore as "the honoured leader of the people of Bengal". He was badly burnt in the crash, and his body could not be returned to India: many inferred that he had never died, others refused steadfastly to believe that he could die without seeing India free, and yet others persisted in the belief, as some still do today, that he would return to lead the country. The government of India set up two commissions, one in 1956 and the other in 1970, to inquire into the circumstances surrounding the death of Subhas Bose, and though the evidence indubitably supported the conclusion that Bose had died in 1945, the opinion in Bengal at least remained that Bose was biding his time to prepare for his victorious and cataclysmic return to India. As late as 1979, Bengali newspapers on January 23, the birthday of 'Netaji', carried a photograph of a man "purporting to be that of Subhas Bose, alive" [Gordon, pp 3 and 604-10].

No one has ever suggested that Bose was driven by anything but the desire to free India from the shackles of British rule. As he explained to a German friend, "India must gain her independence, cost what it may" [p 282]. Although on the fundamental question of the relation of means to ends they differed widely, even Gandhi never questioned Bose's patriotism (then an admired quality), or even his motives. Indeed, Bose's most recent biographer, Leonard A Gordon, an American scholar who previously authored a study of the nationalist movement in Bengal, argues that Bose was so consumed by the question of Indian independence that to his friends he appeared "myopic" [p 283], and Gordon himself creates the impression that Bose spent almost every moment of his adult life in the contemplation of this overwhelming question. Bose, we are also led to believe, died as he had lived, a lonely servant to the cause of Indian freedom at a time when India's other major political figures were already squabbling over the impending spoils of office. Colonel Habibur Rahman, who was with Bose at his death, reported that in his last moment Bose had spoken of the "coun-

try's freedom": "I am dying for my country's freedom. Go and tell my countrymen to continue the fight for India's freedom. India will be free, and before long" [p 542].

If beginnings are important to the enterprises of men and women, surely the endings are too. We know that hagiographies are often built around a great man's last words. Gandhi, for example, lives on as the saint who uttered "He Ram" as Nathuram Godse pumped bullets into his body. Gordon accepts, rather uncritically, the account of Bose's supposed last words, and this easy acceptance of Bose's thoughts and actions characterises in general Gordon's outlook towards his subject. Bose emerges in *Brothers against the Raj*, as he has in countless other hagiographies, as one of the few political leaders of that time to leave behind a clean smell, a man committed to the politics of the 'left', a friend of the working classes, a strong champion of communal amity, and a firm opponent of political bargaining with the British that would yield anything less than complete independence. If this were not enough to endear us to Bose, 'Netaji', the 'respected leader', the epithet by which Bose was known to his soldiers in the Indian National Army (INA) and subsequently to the nation, even appears in Gordon's 'biography' as a 'feminist', a true believer in "equality for women" and an advocate of their "participation in the national movement". "Subhas Bose's feminism is an important and neglected aspect of his vision and work", writes Gordon, who then proceeds to neglect this allegedly "important aspect" of Bose's life [p 194]. Bose did form a women's regiment in the INA [p 497], although it is not apparent what, if any, fighting this regiment did. Bose was clear that "women had not only duties to their family, but they had also a greater duty to their country" [p 238], and by and large he seems to have been satisfied with mouthing the conventional pieties about the inspiration women gave to young men as mothers and their power ('sakti') which needed only to be harnessed to the sacred cause of freedom.

Although Bose may occasionally have espoused positions which contributed to the Muslim estrangement from the Congress, he undoubtedly worked hard towards creating amicable relations between Hindus and Muslims, and here at least his record cannot be impugned. The composition of the INA reflected Bose's various attempts to forge unity among the proponents of the different religious creeds of India, and perhaps a testimony of his personal success in this endeavour is the fact that when the British

instituted proceedings against the INA, they picked three officers of three different faiths—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh—to stand trial. But in other spheres Bose appears less of a radical, indeed less of a 'leader' or 'neta', than his admirers, among whom we may with assurance number Gordon, would have us believe. We hear constantly in Gordon's biography of Bose's sympathies with the 'left', of his 'socialism' and 'radicalism', but this is only to accept Bose's designation of himself. Bose described himself as a "revolutionary" [p 485], but Nehru put it quite forcefully when he wrote in 1940 that "Subhas Bose does not seem to have an idea in his head, and except for going on talking about leftists and rightists he says little that is intelligible" [p 404]. Bose's support of striking workers on several occasions is noted, but Gordon presents no evidence that Bose, who spoke often of the "toiling masses", worked closely with workers over any period of time [pp 170-74]. Although a member of the Bengal legislative council for several years, Bose not only did not particularly distinguish himself as an advocate of the rights of workers and peasants, he even lent his support in 1928 to legislation opposing the extension of rights to tenant farmers. Gordon says, "Subhas [spoke] not at all" during the debate on this legislation, but typically he fails to take him to task [p 176]. Bose adverted often to industrialisation and nationalisation in his speeches, naively holding up the Soviet Union as an example of just planning, yet he did not appear to have had any coherent programme of social reform, or any substantive idea of economic planning, and if he did, we are certainly none the wiser for it after reading Gordon, who in his eagerness to portray Bose as a man of prescience, describes the Planning Committee as "one of Bose's legacies to free India", as though the Soviet Union's commitment to planning were not evident for everyone to see [p 355].

Gordon betrays most clearly his inability and unwillingness to depart from the hagiographical tradition which has plagued biographers of Bose in his assessment of the relationship between Bose and Gandhi. Bose's admirers have seen Gandhi as the 'manipulative' one, their own hero as a victim, and in these pages this story is repeated, no detail being spared about how Bose was manoeuvred out of his second presidency of the Congress [e.g., pp 218-19, 367-68, 374 ff]. Gordon readily delineates the contribution of Gandhi to the partition of India [pp 367-68], and is just as quick to describe Bose as the engine that, as it were, stoked the passivity of Gandhi to life, as the man who through his radicalism and zest for activity spurred Gandhi to initiate the final phase of the drive towards independence. The 'Quit India' movement, according to Gordon, was the "legacy" of Bose, but the mean-spirited Gandhi "never wanted to admit that he was taking up Bose's line" [p 478]. What distinguished them, according

to Bose himself, was that while the Mahatma was superstitious, faddish, antithetical to science and progress, immersed in an impenetrable subjectivity, and prone to unnecessarily spiritualise politics, he was unequivocally on the side of science, rationality, industry, and modern values. Bose deprecated Gandhi's resort to "repeated fasting" [p 272], but thought nothing of his own hunger strikes, no doubt seeing them as part of a grand revolutionary tradition. Bose may have mocked at Gandhi's "inner voice", and at some of the Mahatma's spiritual and political practices and beliefs, but it is worthy of note that he allowed to have amulets pressed upon him when he was once seriously ill, thereby compromising—in his words—his "innate rationalism" [p 381]. Before Bose escaped from India, he "consulted astrologers and palmists" to pick out an auspicious time. "What he needed", writes Gordon, "was good planning and assistance, secrecy, luck, the help of the gods, and proper alignment of the stars" [p 421]. No doubt, since Gordon is at pains to establish that Bose was a good Hindu, he must think that Bose was only living up to his faith.

There was a great deal that was common to Gandhi and Bose. Describing his incarceration with C R Das in 1921-22, Bose wrote that he considered "it a rare privilege to have had the opportunity of serving him for those eight months" [p 89]. This could easily have been a passage from Gandhi's autobiography. It has been said of Gandhi that he considered no work too insignificant that it could not be done with devotion, and Bose too appeared to hold this view and be capable of such devotion [p 200]. Bose meditated, and could, as in Vienna, lead an abstemious life, and like Gandhi he was inclined to think that his family was not confined to his "blood relations" but was "coterminous with [his] country" [pp 262, 286]. Nonetheless, it is the gulf between the two that is most visible, and nowhere was this gulf greater than in their attitude towards fascism. Those who would characterise Bose as a fascist, because he went over to the Nazis, and later in the war to the Japanese, do him the injustice of failing to recognise that Bose too was unequivocally opposed to fascism. A German friend of his even noted "his deep contempt for the Nazis", and Bose was clear that "the emancipation of India must be the work primarily of Indians themselves" [pp 283, 470]. Yet Bose had an instrumental view of the fascist forces aligned against England and its allies: if they could be enlisted in India's war against British imperialism, then it mattered little that fascism was the most extreme and brutal form of imperialism. Racial legislation in Germany bothered Bose, and he even made a protest or two against such of its features as discriminated against Indians, but "he stopped short of protesting" its passage "in general", although Gordon characteristically adds that in his belief "Bose was against it" [p 282]. Nehru and Gandhi were prepared to say that "Hitler

and Japan must go to hell", but Bose could ill-afford to antagonise his "friends", for much like the Irish Republican Army, Bose believed that England's enemies were India's friends [pp 461, 476-77]. Although it is conventional to characterise, as Gordon does, Gandhi as "shrewd" and "authoritarian", very this-worldly in exercising his political ambitions, it was Bose who was wedded to realpolitik. Bose also had, from his college days, a keen faith and interest in militarism, and he saw Germany and Japan as strong, militaristic, and disciplined powers, their soldiers virile, vigorous, and possessed of "speed and mobility", and to his mind all this was worthy of emulation for an awakening India. Bose had once seen fascism as merely an "aggressive form of nationalism", and in 1934 had written with approval of the "supremacy of the State over the Individual" and the "ruthless suppression of all dissenting minorities" [pp 234, 279, 285, 347, 410, 485, 493-94]. Having donned a uniform, Bose imagined himself as a military leader, "inspected" his troops, and engaged in some ridiculous posturing. Gordon takes all of this very seriously, and what we have is an "Indian Samurai in Asia"!

Subhas Chandra Bose, however, is not the only subject of Gordon's biography. Subhas' elder brother, Sarat, led an active political life for several decades, and was certainly one of the most prominent figures in the politics of Bengal in the first half of the 20th century. As member of the Bengal legislative council, the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, and the central legislative assembly, and as leader of the opposition in the Bengal legislative assembly, Sarat Bose worked steadfastly for the cause of Indian

independence, Hindu-Muslim unity, and other interests of the nation and Bengal. Sarat Bose was content to let Subhas play the more active role, and was far less inclined to theatrical gestures than his younger brother, which is one reason we ordinarily hear little of him. Gordon moves easily back and forth between Subhas and Sarat Bose, and is to be commended for having integrated the lives of these two brothers. Ultimately, however, *Brothers against the Raj* has all the limitations commonly found in biographies, a genre particularly ill-suited, except in very few hands, to increase our analytical understanding of the forces that shape history or to derive sustenance from the many theoretical contributions of contemporary scholarship. None of the recent ferment in historical, cultural, or literary studies seems to have left its mark on Gordon; indeed, to write a biography as he has done requires an abiding faith in the great man theory of history. With the text alone running to over 600 pages, *Brothers against the Raj* is enormously rich in detail, and it is emphatically clear, from his citations as much as from the hundreds of interviews that he conducted, that Gordon went to great lengths in his endeavour to write a complete life of the Bose brothers. This is a biography for those who want to know the exact hour at which Subhas Bose fled India, but it is unfortunate that the scholarly apparatus is put to no more use than in recreating, in an uncritical fashion, 'the life and times' of Subhas Bose. Gordon writes in an uninspired style, common to American social science writing, and this greatly adds to the profound disappointment that most readers are likely to experience.

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