

India: 'If Netaji Had Been Alive No One Would Have Dared to Issue Calls for Genocide'

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In an interview with Karan Thapar, Netaji's grandnephew Sugata Bose said the freedom fighter would have been "quite dismayed" to see how the minorities are being discriminated against in today's India.



Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose reviewing the troops of Azad Hind Fauj - 1940s. Photo : Wikimedia Commons

On January 23, Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled a hologram of Subhas Chandra Bose at the India Gate on the occasion of the latter's 125th birth anniversary. The hologram will remain until a statue of the leader of the Indian National Army (INA) is erected. Historian Sugata Bose, Netaji's grandnephew and historian, said that though the announcement to have a statue of the freedom fighter at a "very prominent place in New Delhi is a belated, but a fully deserved honour", the Modi government's policies and beliefs are in stark contrast to Netaji's.

On January 28, 2022, *The Wire* published a video interview of Sugata Bose, who is the Gardiner Professor of History at Harvard University, chairperson of the Netaji Research Bureau in Calcutta and a former Trinamool Congress MP. He and Karan Thapar discussed a variety of topics - from the hologram of Netaji, to the Haridwar 'Dharma Sansad', the hymn 'Abide with Me', the role that members from minority communities played in the INA to Modi's characterisation of Mughal India. This is a transcript of the interview, edited lightly for style and clarity.

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The Narendra Modi government's decision to put up a statue of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose at India Gate is a much deserved, though belated honour. However, it raises a critical question: How would Netaji view the Modi government? And I am talking specifically about its attitude towards minorities and perhaps, in particular, its treatment of Muslims. That is the key question I shall raise today.

My guest is perhaps, one of the few people in the world who knows [the answers to these questions]. He is the Gardiner Professor of History at Harvard University. The chairperson of the Netaji Research Bureau in Kolkata and more importantly he is Netaji's biographer as well as his grandnephew, Sugata Bose.

Bose, Netaji's statue at the heart of the Indian capital is a much deserved though highly delayed

honour. But, how would Netaji view the fact that his statue will be standing under a canopy that was originally intended for a King-Emperor against whom Netaji probably spent a large part of his life politically fighting?

Well, you are absolutely right to say that on Netaji's 125th birth anniversary, the announcement to have a statue at a very prominent place in New Delhi is a belated, but a fully deserved honour. Now, as you know the title of my biography of Netaji is *His Majesty's Opponent* and so, there may actually well be an element of poetic justice in Netaji occupying the space vacated by the King-Emperor. He had spent his entire life fighting for Indian independence and more importantly, in the climactic phase of our struggle, he wanted to replace the loyalty of Indian soldiers to the King-Emperor with a new loyalty to the cause of Indian freedom. And in that, he succeeded remarkably, during World War II and in its aftermath, when he was no longer there.

But you wanted to ask me about the Modi government, which has, of course, made this decision. But it is very important at this stage to point out the values Netaji really stood for. So, my initial reaction when I heard this news, two days before Netaji's birthday [January 23] was that the best monument to Netaji would be to adorn and enlarge his legacy of equality and unity. He was the man who was perhaps the most successful among all of our leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, in uniting Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians on the basis of equal rights and equal respect for all. He had the implicit trust of the minorities and so I think he would have been quite dismayed to see how the minorities are being discriminated against in today's India. He would have liked to see the leaders of contemporary India unambiguously condemning the hate speech emanating from certain platforms, which are not quite the same but not entirely unaffiliated with the ruling dispensation today.

Let me ask you a few specific questions that pertain to things that are either happening today or have actually been said by very senior political leaders like the prime minister or the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh. For instance, the Prime Minister refers to the Sultanate period of Indian history and the Mughal period as, "1200 saal ki ghulami (1,200 years of slavery)." Yogi Adityanath has publicly said, "The Mughals cannot be anyone's heroes."

But, in his book *An Indian Pilgrim* Netaji wrote about how he viewed both the Mughal emperors and the Muslim kings of Bengal. Did he view their rule as slavery?

Never. He wrote not just in *An Indian Pilgrim* but also in his book *The Indian Struggle* - and he said so in numerous speeches he gave in his political career - that Indians felt conquered only with the advent of British rule in India. He thought even when there were Muslim sovereigns, whether in Bengal during the Sultanate period and the Nawabi, or in India during the Mughal Empire, the administration was run jointly by Hindus and Muslims.

Also, let us not forget, his goal was to reach the red fort of Old Delhi. He was less concerned about New Delhi and that was because he saw the Red Fort as a symbol of sovereignty. It's important to note that he visited the grave of the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar in September 1943. There was a parade of the Indian National Army in front of that tomb and that's where Netaji gave his stirring call, "Jai Hind" and also "Chalo Delhi". He respected the Mughals and felt that Akbar, in particular, had brought together all the different religious communities of India at that time.

It's important to remember also, that there were a very large number of Muslims - a disproportionate number in fact - in Netaji's Azad Hind Movement. His closest associates happen to be Muslims. You know my father, Sushil Kumar Bose, drove him on his escape from Kolkata to Gomoh [in present day Jharkhand] but the man who received him in Peshawar was Mian Akbar Shah, who was a Muslim freedom fighter from North-West Frontier Province (NWFP). The only

companion, the only Indian companion, on his submarine voyage in early 1943 was Abid Hasan, a Muslim from Hyderabad in the south. He was possibly his closest aid both in Europe and Asia. The commander of the first division of the INA was Mohammed Zaman Kiani. We talk about the raising of the Indian tricolour in Moirang near Imphal - that was done by an INA officer named Shaukat Malik. The last journey of his was a tragic one and the only companion was Habibur Rahman. We all know that in the Red Fort, the British made a major error of decision by putting on trial a Hindu, a Muslim and a Sikh - Prem Sahgal, Shah Nawaz Khan and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon.

He also had very fine Christian officers in the INA. For example, Cyril John Stracy, who built the INA Memorial in Singapore. He was asked to do so by Netaji on August 15, 1945. "Can you do it?" he asked before the British land in Singapore. Stracy said, "Yes, of course" and said, "Jai Hind" and he kept his promise.

In fact, in a nutshell, I want to pick up a phrase from that quotation of Netaji's from *An Indian Pilgrim*. He said, "It is a misnomer to talk of the Mughal period as Muslim rule." He went out of his way to show that the commandant chiefs, the generals and many important cabinet ministers were Hindu. In other words, this was a joint rule, it wasn't slavery. It wasn't Muslim rule. Am I right in saying that?

You are absolutely right. That word is extremely important - that you have picked out from *An Indian Pilgrim* - "a misnomer" to regard the middle part of the second millennium of the common era as a period of "Muslim rule". This is what the colonial rulers taught us, in terms of thinking about the periodization of Indian history as Hindu, Muslim and then finally British. Netaji for one, never accepted that characterisation.

Now when Netaji founded the INA, he chose Tipu Sultan's springing tiger as its insignia, and it was worn on every epaulette. The army's motto is three simple, red alert Urdu words, "*Etihaad (Unity), Etmad (Faith) and Kurban (Sacrifice)*". So, how would Netaji view today, an almost conscious attempt is being made to distance oneself from, sometimes even to disrespect Urdu and to deny India's Muslim heritage by changing the names of cities like Allahabad or Mughalsarai? How would he view that?

I think he would have been quite dismayed. He honoured those Muslim rulers who had tried to resist the British colonial conquest of India. If you read his stirring proclamation of the Azad Hind Government, which he wrote on the night of October 19-20 and then read out on October 21, he specifically mentions Tipu Sultan by name and he also, of course, mentions Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah and talks about the joint resistance of Hindus and Muslims to colonial rule. I think he would have been aghast at the way in which history is being distorted.

As you pointed out, initially, in the Indian tricolour that he adopted in Europe, there was a springing tiger in the centre. Once he came to Southeast Asia, he decided to adopt the flag, the tricolour with the *charkha* in the middle and that is because he wanted to make common cause with Mahatma Gandhi. But on all the shoulder pieces of the INA uniforms, there was the insignia of Tipu Sultan's tiger.

He was making some very deliberate and conscious attempts to forge unity and have a spirit of religious harmony in his Indian National Army. He chose Hindustani - a mixture of Hindi and Urdu with lots of Urdu words in it - as the link language of his movement. He used the Roman script, so that the many Tamils and people from South India who joined the movement, could easily read some of the orders of the day that he issued. In his speeches - I have heard this from Prem Sahgal, who was from Lahore and fluent in Urdu - that he would ask for Urdu words, the equivalents, which he would then use in his speeches. How can we forget what he said in one of his first speeches, "*Hum*

zinda rahe ya mare, who koi baat nahi hai. Sahi baat yeh hai, ahem baat yeh hai, Hindustan azad hoga." (It doesn't matter whether we live or die. What is important is that India will be free.) He raised this prospect of saying, "*Jab hum Laal Kila Delhi pe jaa kar, vahan hamari victory parade karenge.*" (We will go to Red Fort in Delhi and perform our victory parade). He couldn't even complete the sentence as there was a huge applause from an audience that included Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Punjabis, Pathans, Tamil, Marathi and Hindi speakers and so on.

Now I am very glad to hear that because the one point you have underlined is that Netaji had no antipathy or allergy to Urdu. He used it, he used it frequently, he used it deliberately and also Netaji would not have denied India's Muslim heritage by going out of his way to change names of cities - historical names like Mughalsarai or Allahabad.

Let me raise something else. Last month at a Dharma Sansad in Haridwar, we heard bloodcurdling calls for the genocide of Muslims for ethnic cleansing. Six weeks have lapsed, there hasn't been any criticism. In fact, there hasn't been even a comment by either the prime minister or the government. If Netaji had been alive and had heard these calls, how would he have responded?

First of all, I would say that if Netaji had been around, I think no one would have dared in India to issue those kinds of calls for genocide of India's most significant religious minority. He believed in what he repeatedly described as the need for cultural intimacy. This went beyond mere tolerance of other religious faiths. He felt that the Indian religious communities were a little too distant from one another, that is why he talked about cultural intimacy. He first mentioned that phrase in a speech that he gave as the president of the Maharashtra Provincial Congress, going back to 1928 and he never veered from that path.

I think there should have been an unambiguous and strong condemnation from the prime minister and from the highest echelons of the government when these kinds of hate speeches were made. If we truly believe in Netaji's political legacy, that is what should be done. You cannot simply worship him in statue and not accept his ideas of equality among all of India's religious communities and linguistics groups. Also, men and women might I add. He believed in gender equity as well.

In a speech Netaji gave as Congress president on June 14, 1938, he specifically addressed the problem of communalism. He said, and I quote, "We hear voices of Hindu Raj, these are useless thoughts. Do the communal organisations solve any of the problems confronted by the working class? Do any such organisations have any answer to unemployment and poverty?" How would he, therefore, regard attempts being made in various quarters today to convert India from a secular country into a Hindu *rashtra*?

Again, he would have been dismayed and distressed to see those kinds of developments in today's India. Now, he was someone who was a spiritual person, who was himself very devout. But he would not speak his religion, he did not publicly display any desire to go to temples, even though, I have to say he sent my father and a sister of his to Dakshineswar Kali Temple quietly to seek the blessings of the divine mother before the great escape of January 1941. But that was not public.

Also, Abid Hasan and Mohammad Zaman Kiani have written, and I have heard this story directly from Abid Hasan that in October 1921 he refused to go to the main Chettiar Temple in Singapore on grounds that they did not admit members of the subordinated castes, not to mention people belonging to other religious faiths.

Abid Hasan said, "Oh no, we are losing a big donation from the Chettiars." But then, the Chettairs came back saying you can hold a national meeting in the premises of the temple, and you can bring whoever you want. Flanked by Mohammad Zaman Kiani and Abid Hasan he went there. Abid Hasan

said, Netaji made a speech, which he remembered as it was symphony of religious harmony. That is what sustained Abid Hasan when he went to fight in the battle for Imphal. So, for a man like that, it would be utterly dismaying to see what has been going on in India. And, of course, In the late 1930s, he stood against the politics of the Hindu Mahasabha and made that absolutely clear in his writings.

If I recall the episode you are describing about the visit to the Chettiar Temple, when he walked out of the temple, he immediately wiped the *tilak* that had been put on his forehead. He did not want it to be a symbol that would somehow divide his army. He removed it at once.

That is correct. Abid Hasan said that he saw Netaji and followed suit.

Now, I want to ask you one more question about how Netaji would view the Modi government's treatment, in particular of Muslims, before I broaden the subject. You have pointed out at great length how Netaji's closest and trusted colleagues - including the person who was on that last fatal flight with him - were Muslims. Muslims represent 15% of our population, yet there isn't a single Muslim Lok Sabha MP in the ruling BJP. There is only one Muslim in Modi's cabinet and since 1989, the BJP hasn't put up a single Muslim as a candidate in any election in Gujarat - whether at the state level or national level. What would Netaji make of that particular deliberate attempt by a ruling party to exclude Muslims?

You know I pointed this out in my main speech in parliament in June 2014, when I was a member of the 16th Lok Sabha. I looked around said, "This representative body is not as representative of India's diversity as it should be. Therefore, some of us have to take it upon ourselves to speak for the voiceless who have been denied representation."

This is very bad for our democracy if certain communities, the minorities, feel excluded from our political process. Netaji was quite the opposite from what our ruling dispensation does today. They won't even give nominations to members of religious minorities in elections both at the national and the state level - even when there are significant religious minorities in our population at the state. By contrast, Netaji gave disproportionate or shall I say, weighted representation to members of the religious minorities. There were so many Muslims and Sikhs in his cabinet which he formed of the Azad Hind Government on October 21, 1943.

I have recited the names of his closest political associates and you can see from that, how deeply he trusted members of the religious minorities and they in return, said that he is the leader whom we have. We are prepared to do everything for him. I still remember trying to interview Mahboob Ahmed, who was Netaji's military secretary in 1945, after Prem Sahgal went to the war front. I was doing this interview in Patna as he is from Bihar. I had to stop the camera because he would just weep profusely as he talked about his leader.

He said, "I have had the good fortune of working with Mahatma Gandhi. I had the good fortune of working with Jawaharlal Nehru post independence. [Ahmed became India's ambassador to many foreign countries, including Canada after independence.] But do you know why I am becoming so emotional? There was only one man I was prepared to die for and that was Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose."

Netaji was able to evoke that kind of affection and loyalty because he treated everyone - Muslims, Sikhs, Christians - equally and he was absolutely set against the politics of trying to achieve Hindu supremacy.

In a nutshell, Netaji would have been both a sharp and an outspoken critic of the way the Modi government treats minorities and Muslims in particular?

He would have been. But I think that he would not have let that kind of politics of religious bigotry and hatred gain the upper hand in India. It is incumbent on us as citizens of India today, to actually convey - as we are doing in this programme - to the people of India, what Netaji truly believed in, what he stood for. Because I think there is a lot to be learnt from his book of life and if we want to build a truly united India based on equal rights and equal respect for all, then we need to follow his example.

I want to touch on two other things. But before I come to that, I will just underline for the audience that you agree if Netaji were alive today, he would have been a sharp and an outspoken critic of the Modi government's attitude and treatment of Muslims.

Let me now come to the two other quick issues before I end. It's no secret that the Modi government doesn't like Jawaharlal Nehru and is determined to either undermine or at least cast out Nehru's legacy. Netaji knew and worked very closely with Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1930s. How did he view him? How would Netaji have viewed this attempt today to denigrate and dismiss Nehru?

Subhas Chandra Bose regarded Jawaharlal Nehru as his elder brother. He said this much in letters that he wrote. They were very close in the 1920s and 1930s. Both were the idols of the students and youth of India. They both, together, represented the left leaning tendency within the Indian National Congress. Netaji spoke about *samyavad*. He wanted a form of socialism suited to Indian conditions. Now, they did have some differences in 1939, when Netaji stood against Mahatma Gandhi's favourite candidate for a second term as Congress president. I should add, Netaji won not just because he had support in Bengal. He won in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and so on. He had a nationwide appeal even in those days. At that time, he felt Nehru did not fully support him and he felt somewhat let down. He wrote to Nehru saying, that you are riding two horses. But then, as you can see, once he formed the Indian National Army, even though they had some differences in terms of how to assess the international situation - and Netaji wanted to take full advantage of the international war crisis to strive for India's freedom. He made sure that the three brigades of his first division of the INA were named after Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Azad.

Nehru in turn, decided to put on his barrister's gown - for the first time in a quarter of a century - to join the defence team led by Tej Bahadur Sapru and Bhulabhai Desai at the time of the Red Fort trials of Sahgal, Dhillon and Shah Nawaz. Nehru made a very moving reference to Netaji in his first speech at the Red Fort in August 1947. In fact, in that speech he only mentioned to person by name - one was naturally Mahatma Gandhi and the second was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. He said, "This should have been his [Netaji's] day, he had raised the flag of independence for us and now that I am doing it at the Red Fort, that is the person I am missing today."

In fact, something people don't know is that when Netaji was president of Congress in his first term in 1938, he created what was called the Planning Committee and appointed Jawaharlal Nehru as its chairman. In independent India, Nehru converted the Planning Committee into the Planning Commission. But the legacy, idea and origin goes back to Netaji which then Nehru took and formalised as the Planning Commission. I take it Netaji wouldn't have been someone who would have dismissed and denigrated Nehru?

He would not have. In fact, he waited for Jawaharlal Nehru to return to Europe before launching the National Planning Committee as Congress President. He wanted Nehru to be its chairman if it was to be a success, as he put it. Rabindranath Tagore, at that time, said that he could see only two modernists in the Congress - Nehru and Bose. So, he tried to urge Mahatma Gandhi to let Netaji

have a second term because Nehru was already chair of the National Planning Committee.

Now, because Beating Retreat is on January 29. I want to ask you if there is any way of knowing how Netaji would have regarded 'Abide with Me'. Would he have seen it as Christian, un-Indian and colonial? And therefore something that should be got rid of? Or would he have wanted to preserve and protect it, not just because of the haunting melody, but also because it is Mahatma Gandhi's beloved, favourite hymn?

Netaji would have wanted to preserve 'Abide with Me'. Let me give you an anecdote. This is something that both my father Sisir Kumar Bose and my mother Krishna Bose have written about in their accounts of Netaji and the Bose Brothers. Nehru always stayed in Kolkata as the guest of my grandfather Sarat Chandra Bose and both Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru were staying at Sarat Bose's home at 1, Woodburn Park in 1937 at the time of the meeting of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) in October and November of 1937. There would be Mahatma Gandhi's prayer meetings held on the terrace of the house. Both my parents have written based on the historical and what my father remembered - that the famous singer and musician Dilip Kumar Roy used to sing for Mahatma Gandhi and one of the songs that he always performed in the presence of Gandhiji and Subhas Chandra Bose on the terrace of that house was 'Abide with Me'. And when Dilip Kumar Roy sang, my father has written, tears would flow down the cheeks of Subhas Chandra Bose. Not just when he sang his patriotic songs composed by his father Jitendra Nath Roy, but he was very eclectic in his appreciation of music. When he was in Mandalay Jail, in the mid-1920s, he went on a hunger strike to demand that the British jailers should give them musical instruments. He believed that human beings needed to have music in their hearts in order to be good human beings. So we know, that Subhas Chandra Bose loved 'Abide with Me' as much as Mahatma Gandhi and he was broadminded and generous of spirit.

Thank you for that. I am just repeating, tears would flow down Netaji's eyes when he heard 'Abide with Me' and he loved 'Abide with Me' as much as Mahatma Gandhi. Now, the last question. As you mentioned yourself, even though in 1939, Mahatma Gandhi forced Netaji's resignation during his second term as Congress president, how would Netaji have viewed BJP MPs who today have started to lionise Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse? And how would he view this so-called temple that they want to erect in Godse's name?

Nehru, of course, had said that he would step in front of anyone who tried to assassinate Gandhi. Netaji was completely devoted to the man whom he first referred to as 'Father of our Nation'. What I would say is that Netaji and the Mahatma had their last meeting in June 1940. Netaji pleaded with Mahatma Gandhi to launch another mass movement and Gandhi said that the country is not yet ready. But he added, at the end of their "heart-to-heart talk" - that's what Netaji writes in *The Indian Struggle* - that, if freedom came through the path taken by Netaji, then Gandhiji's congratulatory telegram would be the first to reach him.

He also met two other people, his longest meeting and the most intimate one was with Gandhiji in Wardha in June 1940. He did meet Muhammad Ali Jinnah and he asked Jinnah to join the Congress in a united movement and said, in that case, Jinnah would be the first prime minister of united India. But Jinnah did not accept that proposal.

He also met [Vinayak Damodar] Savarkar. He was very critical of Savarkar in the Indian struggle, saying that he is completely oblivious to the international situation and all that he wants is for Hindus to get military training by getting into British Indian Army while Netaji was trying to achieve exactly the opposite. He was trying to wean away Indian soldiers from the British side and get them to fight for freedom and rising above British divisions of "martial and non-martial races" and so forth.

And as for Godse, who was the assassin of the Father of our Nation, Netaji would have nothing but the strongest possible condemnation. I just wanted to also add, that just one week before Gandhi's assassination, it was Netaji's birthday on January 23. He was asked by someone about Netaji and he said that no one has evoked so much affection and loyalty among all of India's religious communities and linguistic groups as Netaji has. Gandhiji said a week before he was assassinated by Godse, that in memory of that great patriot, cleanse your hearts of all communal bitterness. So, the Mahatma and Netaji were at one when they believed in the equality of all of India's religious communities.

There is no way that Netaji would ever lionise the Mahatma's assassin, would ever approve of people building temples in Godse's name. I just underlined that again for the audience, because I think that is a very important point that you have made there.

But embedded in that answer was a gem and a jewel. Can I before I end, pluck it out? If I heard you correctly, you said in 1940 Netaji met Jinnah and said to him, "Join Congress and you will be the first prime minister of Independent India." In other words, Netaji said this, six-seven years before Mahatma Gandhi said this. Gandhi wasn't the first it was Netaji who was the first to say to Jinnah, "Join Congress and you will be the first prime minister of independent India."

Exactly. He writes about that in his book *The Indian Struggle*, which is a survey of the Indian [freedom] movement from 1920-42. Since we are talking about Gandhi and Netaji and their belief in Hindu-Muslim unity and equality, the one anecdote which I think is really marvellous is Netaji, of course, has passed from the scene but Mahatma Gandhi goes to meet the INA prisoners - Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians in the Red Fort. They say that we had absolutely no differences when we fought for freedom under Netaji's leadership. Now here, the British are trying to give us Hindu tea and Muslim tea separately and Mahatma Gandhi said, "Why do you suffer it?" They replied, "We don't. We mix Hindu tea and Muslim tea exactly half and half and then serve. The same with food." Gandhi laughed heartedly and said, "That's very good." This is from a person who in the early 20s did not believe in inter-dining or inter-marriage. He changed his views over a period of time. It seems he was influenced by Netaji's success in achieving cultural intimacy among India's diverse communities. That was the aspect of Netaji, that he admired most. Every utterance that I have read of Mahatma Gandhi between 1945 and January 1948 on Netaji is in the form of a eulogy - because of his success in treating everyone equally and bringing them together in the movement for independence.

Professor Bose, I thank you for the detailed manner in which you have informed us about Netaji's views. His relationship with Muslims, the trust he had in them and also the strong way in which he would have condemned any calls for communalism. It is an irony, a rather delicious one to end on. Many people believe the Modi government is trying to appropriate Netaji's legacy and gain political benefit from it. After everything you have told us about Netaji's views, let us hope they successfully appropriate his views - because if they do, they will have to reverse their positions and change everything that they have said or done. That would be the most delicious irony. It would be Netaji's conquest over Hindutva even in death. Thank you very much indeed. Take care. Stay safe.

Thank you very much, it was a pleasure to talk to you.

Karan Thapar

Sugata Bose

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